

INTERREGNUM APA

#39



BETWEEN THE TWILIGHT AND TOMORROW!

INTERREGNUM

#39

An Amateur Press Association
exploring the worlds of
Roleplaying, Fantasy, and Science Fiction

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Joseph Teller, Assistant Editor & Art Director

Topics: Favorite House Rules & Gathering The Heroes

Interregnum is an APA comprised of zines written by individual contributors and sent to the editor. It is collated and published eight times a year.

New contributors and subscribers are always welcome. Just mail a check or money order, in US funds, payable to Kiralee McCauley at the address below.

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PUBLICATION SCHEDULE

⇒ The Deadline for inclusion in Interregnum #40 is May 15th. The topics are **When Styles Clash** and **What Breaks the Suspension of Disbelief?** Interregnum #40 will be mailed around July 15th.

⇒ The Deadline for inclusion in Interregnum #41 is Aug 15th. The topics are **What Is A Hero?** and **When the Players Go Off The Map...** Interregnum #41 will be mailed around Aug 1st.



The Editor's Soapbox

Upcoming Topics:

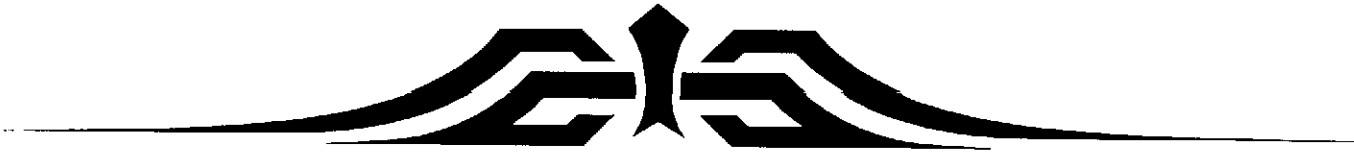
Next Issue, Topic A: **When Styles Clash.** Sometimes you discover the game you thought you were playing isn't exactly the same game everyone else is playing. The mechanics and the setting are the same, but the challenges you expected to face, and the things you expected to happen, just aren't there. Maybe you're looking for intrigue, and the game is a dungeon crawl; maybe you want to face tough ethical questions, and instead you're playing in a soap opera; maybe you thought it was a Heroic fight against Evil, and everybody's gotten bogged down in nitty gritty skirmishes with minor crime lords; maybe you're the GM, and the players just won't do anything fun. Nearly everyone has run into this at some point. How do you deal with it, without losing your cool, doing things you don't enjoy, or making lots of enemies?

Next Issue, Topic B: **What Breaks the Suspension of Disbelief?** One of the most important things to do in a roleplaying game (or fictional story) is to get the players / readers to suspend their disbelief. Luckily, most players will give the GM the benefit of the doubt, suspending their disbelief until it is broken by some inconsistency or unrealistic aspect of the game / story. What kinds of things cause you problems, and break your suspension of disbelief? What makes a game world seem inconsistent to you? Do you have any experience with games where the suspension of disbelief is broken? How did the GM deal with it? What happened?

Following Issue, Topic A: **What is A Hero?** In roleplaying games the PCs are usually expected to be heroes of one sort or another. But what makes an action heroic? What distinguishes a hero from the rest of us?

Following Issue, Topic B: **When Players Go Off The Map...** Eventually it happens. The players ignore every plot hook the GM has laid out, and go in a completely unexpected direction. How do you handle this when it happens? If it's happened to you in the past, as player or GM, what were the results.





About This Issue's Cover:

This issue's cover is by artist Mike McCollum and is the front cover for "The Shining Sea" e-book edition (By our own George Phillies). You can get the book online for \$6 at: <http://3mpub.com/phillies/> (*Third Millennium Publishing Website*). Mike might be known to a few folks from his SF writing in the 1980s and as the owner of Third Millennium Publishing.

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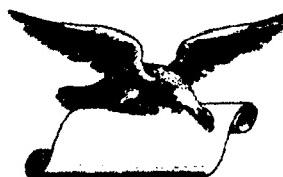
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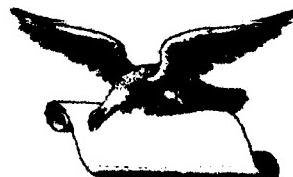
Words on the Wing

ISSUE #10

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A Review of Furry Pirates

Furry Pirates by Atlas Games allows you to play intelligent anthropomorphized animals. However, there isn't much to distinguish between different species. Each one has a paragraph which usually includes a short list of sub-species and what size those samples are. However, such is absent for a few species, including reptiles, the only species to cover the entire range of sizes. The other place where it is extremely noticeable is avians and chiroptera (bats), the two species for which size is most important, since it affects flight maneuverability. There is some mention of stereotypical professions and social status for many species.

There is some serious discrepancies between the random and constructed methods of choosing ability scores. They recommend a constructed PC to have an average of 24 in each ability score on a scale of 3 to 30.

Teenage underdog characters should have average ability scores of 20. However, their suggestions for random include roll 3d10 nine time and arrange as desired, which would produce an average of 16.5. Their preferred method, however, is to roll 3d10 for each ability score, in order and, if you don't like the result, discard the character and start over until you get a result you do like or grow tired of rolling dice. This would



produce the result that reasonable players would end up with characters who have ability scores well below what the game recommends for PCs, while a sufficiently determined player with a lot of time on his hands could just sit there rolling dice until he came up with straight 30's.

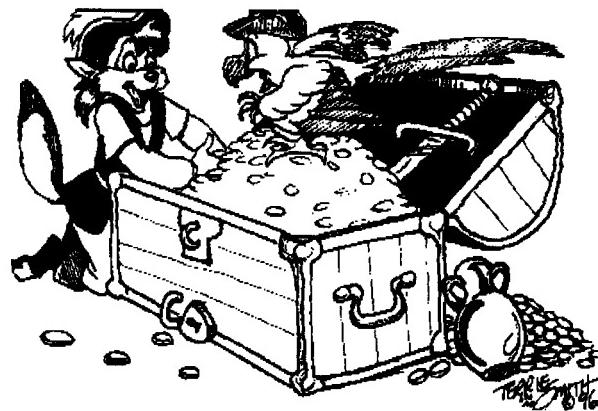
The skill system is level based and excessively complicated. Their solution to the typical problem that 1st level characters aren't very good at anything is to recommend starting characters at 5th or 6th level. (I think the concept is supposed to be that non-adventurers should be around 3rd level while 1st and 2nd level represents children and teenagers.) Each level gives a number of points which can be spent on skills. Those skills which you spend points on have an attack score equal to 50 minus a relevant ability and the points spent on that skill. Those skills which have a defensive use have a defense score equal to a different ability plus the points spent on that skill. Characters also have a couple of generic defenses equal to an ability score plus an adjustment for their level equal to one tenth the points they had to spend on skills. To succeed at a skill use you must roll higher than your attack score plus the defender's defense score. (Unopposed skills use a difficulty factor assigned by the GM for the defense score.)

Also, each skill has a level. Even though the number of points you put into the skill and the amount of adjustment you get for the skill is the exact same number, you can only increase a skill by putting points into it equal to the level one higher than its current level. So, if you skill is currently 6th level, that gives you a modifier of 21 and it costs 7 points to increase that to a modifier of 28. If you only have 6 points, you can apply it to that skill, but

it will remain functionally 21 points until you add one more point to the skill. Likewise, you must earn and spend enough points to reach the next overall level before you gain any increase in your overall modifier.

There are a number of Magick skills, each of which allows the character to cast a particular spell, though some spells are more versatile than others. The energy cost of a spell is equal to the number of points used to buy the skill to that level. While higher level spells generally do more than lower level ones, this does seem to produce the result that spells get more expensive to cast as you get better at them. They don't mention the possibility that a Magick-user might wish to cast a spell at a lower level than it is known to specifically for the purpose of conserving energy. (Though, presumably, if a player wished to do so, a GM could choose to allow such.)

But, even before getting to play, Magick-using characters have a problem. All the groups which teach Magick are described only in the chapter labeled, "Notes for the Games Master" and "This chapter is for the GM's eyes only." The only way the GM can give the player access to just the information on the group he wants his character to be a member of is to copy it out of the book. Not only are the Magickal groups thrown in with all the other important groups and people of



the campaign world, but they are often difficult to find. For instance, Druids are listed under "A" for "Ancient" and the Masons are filed under "G" for "Grand".

Overall, I think the game's mechanics are poor and excessively complicated. There are also too many places where necessary information is difficult to locate or lacking entirely. I'm also uncertain why the authors decided to make the characters furries because they don't really appear interested in such. I haven't read the cultural section of the book, and I don't know enough real world history to be a qualified judge of it if I did, but I would not recommend getting this game with the intention of playing it.

Art by Terrie Smith. Used with Permission.

Comments on Issue #38

Words on the Wing

I finished my win by conquest game of Civilization: Call to Power. My score was less than half what I got for breeding alien life. The most obvious indication that the game designers prefer the later winning condition is that they give bonus points for achieving it, but not for the other. You get positive points for the number of years at peace and negative points for lost units, but both are fairly small compared to your total score. The most severe difference in a single category is the number of celebrations I had in each game. Since being at war tends to produce unhappiness, your cities have fewer celebrations. This compounds with the problem that the points given for year of

victory are trivial compared to the points you could gain from learning advances, building wonders and gaining populations since you'd also have additional celebrations.

The game actually does tell you which technology advances allow you to terraform which terrain types. However, it only mentions it in the description of the terrain type within the Great Library, not in any of the descriptions of the scientific advances or any other place that describes terrain, making it hard to find. Since all the other features of terrain are described elsewhere, it hadn't occurred to me to check any of the terrain types in the Great

Words on the Wing

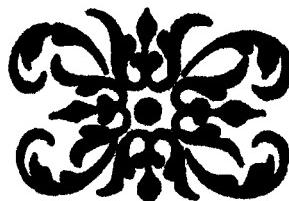
Library before.

The Sign of the Dancing Priestess

Fanfic focusing on improbable sexual liaisons between characters is hardly unique to Star Trek. If I polled my PWFC friends, I could probably get subscription information for a few dozen mailing lists dedicated to the stuff, both show specific and general. Crossover fanfics involving sexual liaisons between characters from different shows are also popular. The only ones I've personally read were Highlander ones. I'll agree that these stories don't match the visions of the copyright holders and the official creative staff associated with Highlander. Neither do the fanfic wars. So I guess you're right that not all fanfic has to fit the official vision of the universe. These examples don't bear any resemblance to that vision and are obviously not intended to. But, because the world in a fanfic story is a shadow of a world created by someone else, the readers will have preconceived notions of the world and the characters which put it in some kind of weird in-between state.

Methos probably has raised adopted children at some point. I do have a story that I started a few years ago that involves Methos' nineteen year old student. That may not be quite the same thing, but Immortal mentors do serve a role similar to that of a parent. I pulled the story out again and did some more work on it. However, it is an action oriented story as this kid's problems are not normal ones.

And Methos does have to find and keep jobs and other mundane problems. But that isn't the sort of thing I enjoy thinking, roleplaying or writing about, nor is it where my writing strengths lie. Also, if the fact that the protagonist is a five thousand year old Immortal has little or no bearing on the plot or the story, it begs the question of why I'm using Methos rather than an original (non-copyrighted) character.



I'm sure that Methos' investigative skills vastly exceed mine. While it's easier to find clues if you know what the

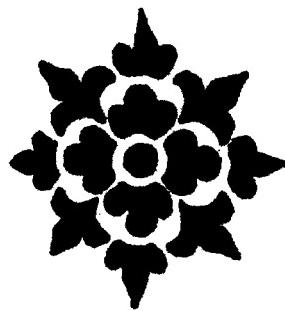
answer is, I don't know if I could convincingly pull off a murder mystery. (And you should know how poor I am at solving mysteries because you roleplay with me and Joe likes to run them.) If I were writing a murder mystery involving Methos, I'd need to give it a Highlander twist or two. Maybe the reason Methos doesn't have an alibi is that he was fighting another Immortal at the time. Or maybe the victim is an Immortal and he isn't really dead.

Firestarter

When I was in high school, there was a guy in our group who decided to play a female character who regularly did things like gain the party free passage on a ship by sleeping with the captain on the trip. That character may not have been as bad as the ones you've encountered, but it did rub me the wrong way. However, it wasn't what convinced me not to play male characters. I like to be able to envision myself as my PC and that's easier when the character is female. I suppose some people would consider that strange since having wings or a tail isn't a problem for me to imagine.

My 'rep' is more along the lines of playing non-human mages with nifty powers, usually acquiring flight from at least one of the three. Well, I rarely have all three on the same character, but almost always have at least one and frequently have two. My avoidance of heavy armor and large weapons is partly because it's generally incompatible with the rest of my character concept and partly because of the self image problem I mentioned above. I can't really imagine myself wearing plate mail and carrying a two handed sword. When I imagine myself as a combatant, it's usually with light armor and/or magical protections and wielding a lighter blade like a short sword or rapier.

I have played in games where women weren't equal to men, but none where I was expected to be cringing and subservient and certainly none where women were routinely raped. There was one culture loosely based on Arabic ones where women as a whole were subservient, but they had the option to declare themselves to be legally a man. In that case, they would have the same responsibility for



their actions as a man. The entire party was technically women (except for the NPC child) but two of them were legally men. I decided that my character's personality was immature enough that she wouldn't want

to be responsible for herself and made arrangements with Kiralee to be her character's wife. (Since she was legally a man, she could have a wife.) While the other people in our culture expected me to act like a woman, the rest of the party didn't and a lot of the campaign was traveling around the desert, looking for the rest of our family who had disappeared in a sandstorm.

Flashback Excerpted from Watching the Watchers

by Cynthia A Shettle
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"Watching the Watchers" was my first attempt at fanfic and was never published. It is a work of Highlander fan-fiction, a non-profit, amateur piece done without permission from TPTB. It is in no way intended to infringe upon the rights of Panzer/Davis, Rysher Entertainment or anyone else in regards to their world or characters. I would also like to thank Carol Ann Liddiard, Kiralee McCauley, Joseph Teller and the Fidonet Highlander echo for all their help and support. Please notify me before publishing this flashback elsewhere, whether electronically or in print. Updates on my other work are available on my fiction page at <http://www.fantasylibrary.com/stacks/fanfic.htm>.

* * * * *

1794 AD - Napales

Alessandro Guicciardini was at Carlo Morelli's house when Lorenzo Farini came running in. "New," he managed to gasp out.

The other Watchers instantly knew what he was talking about. "A new Immortal? Who died?" Morelli asked.

Alessandro knew it was Francesco Pandolfini even as Lorenzo struggled to get out the name. He had been hoping that himself or one of the three other Immortals who lived in Napales at the time would have been able to find Francesco between when he first died and when he woke up again, but it was too late for that now.

"Where is he now?" Morelli asked.

"Woods," Lorenzo gasped. "Chased."

"He woke up and was chased into the woods by the frightened townspeople?"

Lorenzo nodded. "Said. Was. Demon," he managed between breaths.

Alessandro remembered that Lorenzo had been assigned to follow Eugenio Ridolfi when he arrived from Salerno three days ago. "Did Ridolfi hear about him too?"

Lorenzo nodded again.

That was not good. Ridolfi was the one Immortal in town Alessandro did not want to find Francesco. Being a researcher, Alessandro had a certain amount of leeway in what chronicles he could read, and had looked over the one on Ridolfi that Valori had brought with him. In the eleven years since Ridolfi had become Immortal, he had taken three heads, all young and relatively peaceful Immortals. Even so, it was an impressive tally that would have been unheard of just a few short centuries ago.

"I want Pandolfini found," Morelli said. He paused. Including himself, there were only four field agents in town since Valori had returned to Salerno, and now five Immortals that needed watching.

"I'll look for him," Alessandro

volunteered. He was planning to search anyway, though if he found Francesco, he would approach him as Methos. The reasoning behind the non-interference policy was sound, but in the case of comforting a frightened new Immortal, he wished there could be an exception. But other than himself, no Watcher had a valid explanation for how he knew what was going on that didn't compromise the organization.

Morelli looked at him thoughtfully. "No, I think I want an experienced agent looking for Pandolfini, you can take over Farini's assignment." He turned to face Lorenzo Farini. "And you can look for Pandolfini."

The urgency of Morelli's locating Francesco escaped Alessandro. None of the other Watchers would be able to do anything if they found him other than wait for another Immortal to show up. And Alessandro didn't appreciate being put on field assignment. Unfortunately, since hunting for Francesco counted as a field assignment, he didn't have any grounds to protest. If he wanted to, he could point out that he wasn't trained in field work, but that tactic was too likely to backfire. It wouldn't be safe for Alessandro to be field trained by anyone not aware of his secret liabilities in regards to tailing Immortals. At least if he went on his own, he could use his secret strengths to compensate.

Lorenzo, after catching his breath, left for the woods to look for Francesco. Alessandro considered ignoring his assignment and heading in that direction as well, but there were three other Immortals to look for Francesco, and surely one of them must have heard something about what had happened. Francesco would be safe with one of them, and Alessandro would be just as happy not to reveal himself to another Immortal.

Alessandro resigned himself to the concept of following Ridolfi. It wasn't his first field assignment, and it wouldn't be his last. He knew that he was skilled enough at sensing other Immortals to be able to follow Ridolfi without getting close enough to be sensed himself. But just to be on the safe side he went home to get his sword first.

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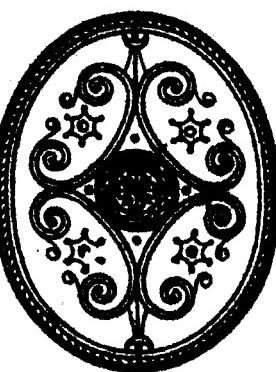
It was easy enough for Alessandro to find the inn where Ridolfi had been staying these past three days. The inn had already lit the gas lamp outside the door, even though it had just started getting dark. Alessandro stopped and waited when he sensed another Immortal at the edge of his range. It was a pattern he didn't recognize, so by process of elimination it must be Ridolfi. Either that or another Immortal who, like himself, hadn't been identified as such by the Watchers.

Checking the power level of the other Immortal, Alessandro discovered that it was a bit higher than he was expecting. Either Ridolfi's three victims weren't quite as young and innocent as the Watchers thought, or there had been a fourth one they didn't know about.

Alessandro was still annoyed with Morelli for assigning him to field work. One of the major points of the Watchers was so that mortals who couldn't be sensed would follow the potentially hostile Immortals around for him, so he wouldn't have to go near them. But Morelli didn't know who or what he was and, if he wanted to keep it that way, he couldn't complain.

As he waited, Alessandro concentrated on keeping his awareness of Ridolfi's presence on a conscious level. This was one of the most basic of the many refinements to his senses that he had acquired over the millennia. Though he expected that few Immortals even knew it was possible, let alone wanted to use it. The immortal senses were designed as a warning system, and his instincts told him to resolve this potential hazard. What exactly he should do was fairly vague, but his current inaction wasn't it.

It was a few hours before he felt Ridolfi approach the door to the inn. Alessandro prepared to move quickly since he had little margin for error. His senses were more acute than other



Immortals, but the extra distance was very small compared to the full range at which he could be sensed. In a certain sense being who he was included a liability, since the more powerful an Immortal, the farther the maximum range at which he could both sense and be sensed. And Alessandro was the most powerful Immortal on the planet, last he checked.

While Ridolfi probably wasn't paying attention, and therefore was unlikely to pick up someone at maximum range, it still wasn't a risk Alessandro was willing to take. Alessandro pulled some of his energy in closer to himself in order to reduce the odds of detection even further, though he kept this ability on a minimal level at the moment. It didn't really reduce the total space his energy covered, just caused it to thin somewhat around the edges. And it required even more concentration on top of what he needed for the tracking sense. Alessandro just knew he was going to have a major headache by the time the night was over. Just one more reason to dislike field assignments.

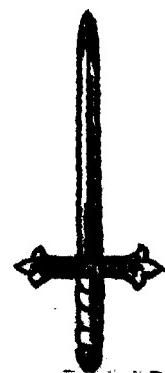
Alessandro mentally compared the other Immortal with the description in Ridolfi's Chronicle. The short brown hair matched, as did his height of five and a half feet and he was still wearing the long black cloak that Lorenzo had seen him in that afternoon. This confirmed Alessandro's initial assumption with information that he could share with the other Watchers.

Ridolfi headed towards the market district, which was nearly deserted at this time of night. The gas lights along the main road gave off adequate illumination, but Ridolfi turned and headed down a side street. Alessandro wondered what he was up to.

Suddenly Ridolfi stopped short and looked around. Alessandro quickly ducked behind a building. He didn't think he had gotten close enough to alert Ridolfi, but no other explanation seemed forthcoming. Could he be slipping, or was Ridolfi a lot better than he thought? The reassuring weight of the sword hidden under his cloak reminded him that even if he was caught, at least he wasn't defenseless.

Ridolfi called out, "There's no point in hiding. I can feel your presence." But his slow movement took him away from Alessandro.

A voice from the street responded, quavering with fear, "What are you? Some kind of demon? Are you the one who brought me back after the accident?"



Realization struck Alessandro; it wasn't him that Ridolfi was sensing after all. Francesco had sneaked back into the city, probably looking for supplies of some kind. Alessandro cautiously peered around the corner.

Ridolfi had his sword out and Alessandro could just make out a second figure beyond him in the dim light. Alessandro remembered that Francesco was about five foot nine, but the half crouch the figure was in prevented an accurate estimate of height. Ridolfi walked slowly towards the figure. "You don't know what we are. You're the new one they're all talking about, aren't you?"

Alessandro pulled his energy in tighter, making himself harder to detect as he crept closer until Francesco was within his range. This confirmed his deduction of the man's identity. Except for the fact that Francesco was now fully Immortal, his pattern was the same as Alessandro remembered it. For the benefit of the Watchers, Alessandro also noted Francesco's black hair, though he was not close enough to see his brown eyes.

Francesco's voice still sounded frightened. "Who are you? What do you want from me?"

Ridolfi continued to approach as he raised his sword menacingly. "Not much. Just your head."

Alessandro's responsibilities as a Watcher warred with his responsibilities as an Immortal. But only for a moment. This wasn't

a question of his identity; it was a question of right and wrong. And what was about to unfold before him was clearly wrong.

Methos allowed his presence to fill the street as he stepped forth from the building's shadow and approached the others openly. "That's not how the Game is played."

Both figures looked at Methos as they sensed his approach, one with fear, and the other with disdain. Ridolfi retorted, "This Game of yours is life or death, kill or be killed. I intend to take my power when I can."

Methos replied quietly, but firmly, "There are still rules to be followed."

"And who are you to enforce them?" Ridolfi demanded.

"My name is Methos." The lack of recognition on the young Immortal's face was not unexpected. Methos drew his sword from its hiding place, feeling his quickening flow along the blade as he gripped the hilt.

Ridolfi looked warily at Methos's sword, obviously not interested in a fair fight. They stared at each other a moment, then Ridolfi made up his mind. "All right, you can have him. But I'll be back." He sheathed his sword and marched off past the quivering Francesco.

Sheathing his own sword, Methos went over to Francesco. He was now close enough to see the bloody and torn clothes, indicating that no one had given Francesco a chance to change them since his death. "Are you all right?" Methos willed his sense of Ridolfi back to conscious awareness as he spoke.

Francesco was still frightened, but he seemed to grasp that Methos wasn't hostile. "What's happening to me?" he wailed.

Methos used a reassuring tone of voice. "We are Immortal. What happened to you after your accident has happened to me and to others like us many times. It's nothing to be afraid of." As he spoke, Methos felt Ridolfi turn the corner and stop, securely within what he likely assumed Methos' range to be. If Methos had

been an ordinary Immortal, having already dismissed Ridolfi as a threat, he would fail to be alerted if he returned. That was a clever trick, especially for one so young, but Methos was far from an ordinary Immortal, and it merely warned him to expect treachery.

Francesco asked, "Why did that other man want my head?"

The eldest Immortal kept his tone calm and soothing even as he waited for Ridolfi's return. "The only way we can die is by having our heads removed from our bodies and if it is another Immortal who kills you, he will gain all of your knowledge and power. Most Immortals are more honorable than Ridolfi is about it though. If you come with me, I will take you to an Immortal who will teach you our ways."

Francesco was calmer now, but still confused. "Why can't you teach me?"

Methos considered this question carefully. He didn't want to lie, but he couldn't tell the truth. "The place where I have to go isn't one where I can bring another Immortal."

"Where is that?" Francesco asked, puzzled.

"I can't tell you," Methos replied. "But if you ask your mentor about Methos, maybe you'll understand my actions a little better."

Francesco considered this. "Methos? That's what you said your name was, isn't it?"

Methos nodded. "I have something of a reputation among older Immortals." That was putting it mildly, but he didn't think it would help to mention that many of the middle aged Immortals weren't sure that Methos was a real person. Antonio Mazzini was about three hundred; he could tell Francesco the legends.

Francesco said hesitantly, "Ok, I'll go with you. Where is the Immortal whom you want to teach me?"

Unwilling to reveal too much while Ridolfi was still in earshot, Methos replied, "He's right here in town. Come, we can go

there now." Methos started off away from Ridolfi's hiding place. Francesco followed him cautiously.

Methos sensed as Ridolfi returned to the street and trailed after them. Methos led the other Immortals a couple of blocks in the direction of Antonio's house. As he felt Ridolfi get closer, Methos placed his hand on his sword hilt. Just before Ridolfi reached striking distance of Francesco, Methos turned and stepped between the other two Immortals, drawing weapon as he did so.

Ridolfi stopped short; this was not what he was expecting. But he must have decided that he was committed now, because he took an experimental swing at Methos's neck which was easily parried.

Though he wasn't certain he really wanted to kill the vicious child before him, Methos pushed the consideration from his mind. He would have time to worry about such things once the fight was over. Still, he kept on the defense while he studied Ridolfi's fighting style. Ridolfi's first few swings were tentative, as if he were trying to take Methos's measure as well. That was fine with Methos, he was patient enough to wait Ridolfi out.

As Ridolfi realized that Methos wasn't retaliating, his swings started to gain confidence. Their swords sparked as they connected, the extremely large amount of quickening in Methos's blade making up for the near lack of it in Ridolfi's. Ridolfi's swings increased in frequency and it started to require effort from Methos to block them all. It was getting time to end this fight.

In his overconfidence, Ridolfi was leaving himself wide open after most of his swings. Methos probably could just disarm Ridolfi and give him a good scare if he wanted to, but Ridolfi was unlikely to learn his lesson, which made him too dangerous to let live. Methos took the next invitation that presented itself and went for the fatal blow.

Ridolfi's body appeared to hang suspended for a moment before crumpling in a heap on the ground. Methos dropped to his knees to brace himself for the Quickenings. It

had been almost three hundred years since his last kill, but this wasn't a sensation that one could ever forget. Ridolfi's Quickenings rose from the crumpled body on the ground before Methos with the usual blue-white glow. Methos tightened his grip on his sword as the pain, pleasure, and sheer raw power of the Quickenings began to fill him. The scholar in him attempted to analyze the sensations, but he just couldn't concentrate.

An eternity later, though Methos knew intellectually that it was less than a minute, the energy storm subsided. He glanced around and noted a couple of broken windows. Unable to muster the concentration necessary to overcome the disorienting effect the Quickenings had on his more arcane senses, Methos turned his head to look for Francesco.

Compared to the Quickenings, the street seemed much darker than it had just a few minutes ago, before the fight. But as Methos's eyes got reaccustomed to the dim light, he spotted Francesco, curled in a terrified ball and huddled against the wall of one of the buildings. Methos called softly, "Francesco".

The young Immortal looked up at the sound of his name. He didn't say anything, but the look of fear in his eyes spoke volumes.

Methos replied wearily, "I had to do it. He would have killed you if I didn't." Methos wondered whether he was trying to convince Francesco or himself.

Francesco didn't move. His continued stare was his only reply.

The surrounding buildings were all stores that were closed at night, so they shouldn't have local residents to deal with. But the Quickenings would have been visible for several blocks and that would attract the other Watchers. Methos made a decision. "There will be people coming to investigate. I have to stay and talk to them, but you should leave now. Do you know Antonio Mazzini?"

The young Immortal shook his head.

"He's the Immortal I was bringing you to." Methos gave Francesco the directions to

Antonio's house. "Did you get that?"

Francesco nodded silently.

"Go there and tell Antonio that Methos sent you to him for training."

Breaking out of his trance, Francesco asked, "I'm never going to see you again, am I?" Methos couldn't tell whether the quiet voice was tinged with hope or regret, or maybe a little of both.

"Very few people ever see me at all," Methos answered softly.

Francesco nodded; apparently this was expected. He said, "Goodbye," quietly as he slowly rose to his feet. Without another word he turned and walked away.

Methos whispered, "Goodbye."

Alessandro watched Francesco leave before he slowly rose to his feet, sheathing his sword as he did so, thankful that the energy of the Quickenings had seared away all traces of blood. When the other Watchers arrived, he would tell them what had happened, except for referring to his own actions in the third person.

That should more or less satisfy them and the shock of seeing a Quickenings on his first field assignment would explain why he didn't think to go after Methos. This identity was still new enough that he hadn't officially heard of the elusive eldest Immortal anyway. Alessandro removed his Watcher medallion from his belt purse and put it back on as he looked for a spot he could claim to have hidden in during the combat.

* * * * *

1794 AD - Rome

Methos entered the church. He could sense that Darius was the only other Immortal present, but there were several mortals in the room.

Darius spotted him looking around and came over. "Hello, can I help you?"

"I see you've moved," Methos commented, scanning the large room and the people in it. He noted the Watcher medallion worn by one of the men in layman's clothes, and knew it was the reason for Darius's current discretion.

Darius smiled.
"I see you found me anyway."

Methos smiled back. "Don't I always?
You're not nearly as good at hiding as I am."

"I don't know anyone who is as good at hiding as you are. But I'm not really trying to hide at the moment. Paris isn't very safe right now, even for a priest."

"Or one of us."

"But we are safe here, so you won't need that." Darius indicated Methos's sword, worn openly on this occasion.

"I know, but I'd feel naked without it."

Darius gave Methos a strange look, as if he suspected that Methos no longer carried a sword on a regular basis. "Why don't we go to my quarters where we can speak more openly."

Methos indicated that he should lead the way and Darius did so. When they were safely in the privacy of his quarters, Darius asked, "What's the sword really for? If you wanted my head you would have taken it twelve hundred years ago."

Alessandro smiled. "It's for the benefit of your friend out there, part of my disguise."

Darius looked at the Italian nobleman's garb Alessandro had put on in order to justify the openly worn sword to those mortals who knew only that the practice was starting to go out of date. "And who are you disguised as?"

"Myself, actually. I'm hoping an unconfirmed sighting will misdirect the search without intensifying it."

"You came here to be spotted, so you can go back home again? Won't the other Watchers be suspicious that you're in the same city as Methos for both of his recent sightings?"

Alessandro shook his head. "They don't know I'm here. I just took some time off to think."

"Why? What happened?"

With a sigh, Alessandro turned his head. This was what he was really here to talk about. "I killed someone."

Darius noticed the change in his attitude. "You've killed people before."

Alessandro nodded. "Thirty six times before."

"He was an Immortal?"

Alessandro nodded again.

Darius seemed confused. "But..."

"I saw myself kill someone. He was my assignment."

"But you can't do field work! You're an Immortal!"

"You know that and I know that, but they don't know that. We were short handed and the local coordinator felt putting a researcher on field assignment was his only option."

"Surely you must have realized that you would get caught. Why did you do it?"

"No, I didn't know I would get caught! In fact, I didn't get caught. And even if I had been caught, that wouldn't have justified killing someone."

"If you didn't get caught, what happened?"

"Someone had just become Immortal; he's the reason we were short handed. My assignment found him and was going to take his head without even bothering to tell him what he was. I had to stop him."

"So you killed him?"

Alessandro shook his head. "I tried to scare him off first, but he wouldn't listen. He went away for a little while, then came back and tried to sneak up on us. That's when I fought and killed him."

"If your actions were justified, why do you feel guilty about them?"

"Besides breaking my Watcher oath, the Immortal I killed was only thirty two - still a child by our standards. I don't kill children."

"He wasn't acting much like a child."

"I know, but it still shouldn't have happened. None of it should have happened." Methos came to a decision. "I'm never going to take another field assignment as long as I live."

Darius smiled. "I could have told you that to begin with."

Alessandro smiled as he considered telling Darius about all the successful field assignments he had had, then decided not to. Even after twelve hundred years, Methos still didn't trust Darius with all of his secrets.



The Real McCoy

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Interregnum #39

(Layout and art selections are to be blamed on Joseph Teller)

I don't really have the time to come up with stuff on topic (not to mention that I have to dig up the last IR from moving house), but I do have some fiction lying around... The file-name for this one is "Descrip in search of a plot." Basically, that's what it is, I fear. But it might amuse, so here it is.

"Coming of Age"

By Elizabeth McCoy

Footnote: John Moore once invented Unars; all this cultural and biological stuff is mine and Walter Milliken's (my spouse), so I really doubt he'd recognize the species now.

Footnote 2: Unars recognize four rough stages to their life-cycle, with a different set of pronouns used for each stage -- a quick primer for the translations used in this story: **hatchling** (non-sentient, non-gendered): it, its; **neuter** (sentient, non-gendered): sie, hir;

21 crouched, grass brushing hir belly, sides, tail. The meat-beast was upwind of hir and hir hunting-group, and they only needed to get a little closer before 43 made hir run to spook the animal. 21 was acutely aware of the dirt beneath hir feet, pressing into the curve of hir toes' killing claws, the scent of the meat-beast, even the feel of hir teeth beside hir tongue. This hunt, sie felt, was *special* in a way that sie had no words for. Hir hands itched with the need to hold new-killed flesh and bone, and sie clenched and unclenched hir fingers silently with hir heartbeat, pausing only when sie took a step closer to the quarry.

Finally, in an eternity that sie had never felt before during a hunt, 21 and the others were in position, and 34 crept a bit longer, nearly upwind of the animal. 34 raised hir head and body to sprint, body a long graceful line from hir muzzle and upraised arms to the tip of hir outstretched tail. Sie was the youngest of the five hunters, and therefore fast, fast like 21 dimly remembered being, once before hir thumbs lost their talons.

The meat-beast raised its beak as 234 came at it, and turned to bolt. 28 made hir attack-run impatiently, long before the beast was in range. 21 had bullied the other hunter onto an edge-position for exactly that impatience -- the meat-beast, already being herded towards the others by 34, turned almost straight at 21. Sie waited, heart pulsing to the animal's gait, and then leapt up, aiming hir jump so hir killing claws would come down on its eyes, and the rest of hir body on its neck and back.

It reared as best it could, trying to turn yet again, but 27 and 30 jumped it from both sides, tangling its legs with their tails and clawing at its underbelly and sides. 28 attached hirself to the beast's flank momentarily, before being whipped away by the animal's powerful tail, while 34 dashed past the staggering mass of animal and hunter, turned, and darted in to close hir fangs on the beast's neck.

The meat-beast howled and tried to shake off its killers, but their combined weight bore it down, and 34's grip on its throat made it go still. The hunters were already tearing off strips of flesh, gulping it down before it could be stolen. 27 released hir front leg to squabble with 28 over the entrails, and 21 grabbed hold of that untouched leg, pulling it close to hir body while sie gnawed it from the beast's body. Sie was hampered by holding the leg with both hands, but managed to satisfy hir hunger with the others -- if not on the choicest bits.

After the hunters were sated and drowsing in the grass around their kill, the Older Ones came. 21 studied them, how they walked more upright on feet with no killing claws, tails in a graceful curve. The Older Ones had delicate hands, with no thumb-talons whatsoever, and they did not snap at each other, ever. They used words, too -- they'd taught 21 and all hir classmates some words, but those were simple things, like "Yes" and "No" and "Hungry." The Older Ones used so many of them, so often. There was something wrong about their colors, though 21 was not sure exactly how sie knew they should be different -- instead of green, tinged with golds and blues and browns, and patterned with ultraviolet, the Older Ones were drab grays; they didn't have a proper scent, either. It didn't matter. Sie could half-close hir eyes and tell hirself sie was upwind, and the way they moved...

21 found hirself approaching the largest of the Older Ones, meat-beast leg still clutched firmly in hir hands. As sie got closer, sie ducked hir head, dropping until sie was nearly horizontal, moving hir feet in awkward quasi-hops. The Older One looked down at hir, eyes golden and mesmerizing behind the clear dome over its face. "Twenty-one? What is it?"

Sie didn't know the words to answer that question. Sie just held out the animal's leg, only a little tattered from the kill, still with good meat on the bone.

The largest Older One watched, then turned to one of the others. "Parr's Fourth, Twenty-one should be placed in higher education now. Sie is ready for it. Twenty-eight's innate cunning is lacking. Run some more tests on hir. I think sie's marginal." The Older One walked away, still speaking words that 21 did not understand.

21 dropped hir head and pressed the beast-leg against hir belly again, wishing sie'd been able to give the Older One the whole animal, and wondering why.

The Older Ones herded the hunters back into the moving-ground cage, patting them on the hips and pointing, speaking slowly, "There. Go there. Twenty-eight, go there. Yes. Good. Thirty-four, good, go there." None of the Older Ones would take 21's animal-leg, and finally 34 snatched it away from hir and tore off a chunk. After that, it didn't seem so important and 21 watched the ground moving past, instead. Sie had to smack 28 once, when the other hunter tried to pin hir down. 28's ultraviolet patterns were nearly as bright as 21's, which meant they had to watch each other most of the time, vying for status in the hunt-groups.

When they got back to the hunters' dens, the Older Ones told 21 to wait in a different den, all alone. Sie paced around the den, wishing that sie were in with the others, snuggled against 38 and the 40's. That was calming, slightly, though recently 21 had been restless, even when sleeping with the others.

Finally the Older Ones came back, and took hir away, saying, "Twenty-one, you will be living in different quarters now. You will be educated with other pre-apprentices of your age, and you will learn words and tools. You should not be distressed. This is natural. You will find a good family-head this way." 21 didn't understand most of the words. Hir hands itched, and sie wished 34 hadn't eaten the meat-beast's leg.

Education, 21 discovered, was a strange process. First, hir killing-claws were trimmed, and a muzzle was fitted to hir mouth, leaving enough room to talk, but no way to bite anything. Sie was told that hir designation was now 21-710-3450. Those numbers were on a tag on hir muzzle, and etched into each of the killing claws on hir feet, as well as marked on hir shoulder and one forearm, where sie could read it as often as sie needed to. The patterns of dots were soothing and regular. Numbers were easy, always meaning the same things. Words were harder.

Then sie was put in a room with other bright-patterned hunters of hir age, all with blunted claws and cages around their mouths. One of them was 34, and sie was confused for a moment until sie realized that the 34 sie knew wasn't 34-701-3450. That helped when sie saw 21-689-3450 on another hunter's shoulder. Sie crouched near the wall, staring at the numbers on hir arm and occasionally trying to snap at anyone who stepped on hir tail.

After a while, an Older One appeared, and began speaking to them, saying words and pointing at patterns that appeared on the walls. It was harder to understand these word-patterns than to understand number-patterns, but even if 21-710-3450 hadn't been interested in all words and patterns, the Older One had such a compelling voice. Sie began echoing the words, along with others, until finally the whole room of hunters were crooning words in reply to the Older One.

"This word is *Unar* -- say with me, *Unar*. That is what we all are. *Unars*. It is the name of our planet, and us."

21-710-3450 finished typing on hir report and pressed the SUBMIT key. The time -- 20 minutes, forty-nine point nine seconds -- was noted at the top left corner of hir screen. Sie lashed hir tail a little, thumping the walls of the test cubicle, then stretched in hir chair, scratching hir pitiful toe-nails against the rubberized floor. Sie had to be careful with one toe, since the killing-claw had fallen off it recently, and the tiny replacement nail was still new.

Sie leaned against the chest-rest of her chair and looked around. Hir chief rival, 21-689-3450, was stretching and looking around too. 21-710 salivated a little, hoping that *sie* had finished before 21-689.

After ten more minutes, the cubicle doors opened and the students crowded out, heading for the cafeteria.

"Did you remember your divisors, twenty-one?" 21-689 asked as they left the testing wing of Kaltess' Second Pre-Apprentice School.

"Did you remember your punctuation on the report?" 21-710 retorted.

"Did either of you remember your xenology lessons?" 36-900-3452 asked, coming up behind them. They ignored the other student's question as much as they ignored each other's. 36-900-3452 was precocious, taking tests even while sie still had to wear a muzzle, lest sie bite other neuters instinctively; sie two years younger than either 21. Rumor had it that the young genius was genetically enhanced; this rumor gained probability when students saw how many of the Kaltess-family's apprentices were watching 36-900-3452 at any given time. One of the eldest students, 107-63-3447, had tried to test the assumption by picking a fight with 36. 107 had discovered that the apprentices had no need to bother with protecting 36; younger meant faster and more claws. Even muzzled, 36 had sent 107 to Medical -- and to more classes, when sie explained *why* sie had fought with 36.

The cafeteria was huge, accommodating a few hundred students. 21-710 had stopped trying to count the exact number long ago, despite the urge to know the numbers. Precocious 36 was still making the attempt, balancing on hir toes and extending hir neck as far as possible. "Over three hundred," sie finally said, dropping down to hir feet and catching up with the 21's.

The other 21 thumped hir tail and took a bowl of meat cubes from a dispenser. 21-710 followed suit, as did 36. Next came the containers of water -- instead of adult glasses with a single round opening, they had spouts for the younger neuters, who hadn't developed proper lip control and/or still wore muzzles.

21-689 had already claimed three places at one of the tables, and they settled into their chairs, leaning against the chest-rests and using their hands to pick out meat-cubes. 36 had to shred hirs a little to fit them through the muzzle. "What do you think you scored?" the younger student asked.

"Above sixty percent," 21-710 said.

"That's a given," 21-689 muttered. Sie gestured with hir nose in the direction of a 3446 student, brownish with the ultraviolet patterns almost glowing. "Just as it's a given that sie won't have gotten above seventy-five percent."

36 blinked at the old neuter. "What's going to happen to hir? Sie's not good at *anything*."

The 21's looked at each other. 21-710 said, "The year that we entered training, there was a 3443 who wasn't chosen. Sie came into the cafeteria, looked up at the score-boards, and tried to kill all the older students around hir."

21-689 straightened up from hir chair, proudly. "It was the 3450's who took hir down."

36 slipped the water-spout through hir muzzle to drink. "Seven years younger, and fresh from the dens... Was there anything left to send to Medical?"

21-710 remembered the feel of hir blunted killing claws, tearing into the berserk student's back. "No. Not of the 3443. Some of us got bitten a little, but no one died."

The other 21 pointed up at the score-boards. "Ah, they've started grading ours. Yessssssss." There was an "89%" glowing next to 21-689-3450.

"Yessssss!" A "90%" next to 21-710-3450.

36-900-3452 just sniggered through a mouthful of meat, with a "93%" -- the highest score on that particular set of tests -- shining next to hir numbers.

The 3446 (73-203-3446) had gotten a 50%, and was moaning and rocking back and forth on the floor, arms wrapped around hirself. Other students were giving the old one space. 36 opened and closed hir jaws as much as the muzzle would allow. "Will this one go crazy too?" sie asked hopefully.

"I don't know, but you're welcome to go after hir if sie does," 21-689 said, picking up hir empty dishes and heading for the recycling station. "We're too old for those stunts."

One of the cameras, blank silver hemisphere affixed to a contragrav unit, left its niche high on the cafeteria wall and came down to hover between 21-710 and 36. Knowing that meant an Adult was taking a particular interest in one or both of them, 21-710 wanted to offer hir last piece of meat to it, and stopping the instinct left hir quivering, tail pressed as flat against the floor as sie could get it while sitting in a chair.

36 was younger, and did lift hir bowl, trying to grovel in hir seat. The camera stayed there for long enough that 36 lowered the bowl and ducked hir head self-consciously, then it orbited the pair for a few seconds more, before drifting back to its wall-niche.

A troupe of muzzled 3453's stampeded past, and 21-710 shivered convulsively from nose to tailtip, digging hir nails into floor and table, ignoring the twinge of pain from hir naked toe.

"I wonder if that were a Matriarch or a Patriarch looking at us," 36 sighed wistfully.

"I don't know," 21-710 murmured, staring up at the motionless camera on the wall.

Six months later, after another round of tests, the three were again discussing scores, and the latest rumors that maybe some older students hadn't been apprenticed, but had vanished due to age and low scores.

"...and *sie* heard from a 3449 that hir *den-sib* just *vanished*, and hadn't been making better than fifty percents on the last three tests. No cameras looking at hir den-sib, nothing. Just one morning *sie* wasn't in the barracks," 21-689 said furtively.

"*I heard*," 36 added, also in an undertone, "that there was a 3447 who was *cheating* on tests, and the apprentices just came in *during a test* and took hir away."

"*And I heard--*" 21-710 started, when the 3446 paced by, slowly, and shivering as if sie were cold. 21-710 broke off and asked, "What's wrong with hir now? Is *sie* sick?" Sie couldn't think that the School's apprentices wouldn't have taken a sick neuter to Medical, though, even a useless one like the 3446.

36 thumped hir tail scornfully. "Can't you see hir patterns? How bright they are? *Sie*'s got to Change soon, or *sie*'s in big trouble. It's in my advanced Unar Biology course."

The other 21 looked after the old neuter. "I wish they'd take *hir* away to die. It's just a matter of time. No cameras look at *hir*. Sie's never any good at anything, can't even make above a sixty-five percent, these days."

"I wonder if it's because sie needs to Change?" 36 mused, ignoring how the older 21's shifted uneasily. "Sie acts sick all the time. Maybe that's why *hir* scores are so bad."

21-710 crouched and chewed on *hir* meat cubes, trying not to think about being that old, and still neuter, with *hir* body dying to Change and distracting *hir* when sie needed all *hir* wits and skill most...

Some of the School's apprentices were moving around today, genderless themselves in their isolation suits lest the sight or scent of a gendered Unar start a wave of Change in the students.

There was a commotion a few tables away, and 21-710 climbed onto the table for a better view, with 36 springing up beside *hir* with youthful, neuter grace.

The disturbance was the 3446 student, convulsing on the floor as older students backed off hastily and younger ones moved in. The apprentices were moving through the crowds of students quickly, neuters making way for the gendered from instinct even without pheromone or ultraviolet cues. When the apprentices got there, one took a hypospray from his or her belt and injected the 3446 with it. A final convulsion, and the old student lay still. *Hir* bright ultraviolet patterns had started to fade already. 21-710-3450 felt strange.

As the apprentices took the 3446 away, 21-710 looked at the score-boards. Sie flitted past the high ones -- 95% for 36, a pair of 93%'s for *hirself* and the other 21 -- and looked at the score for 73-203-3446. It was an 80%.

21-710-3450 thought it very strange that one's life might change so suddenly, without fanfare. The three -- friends and rivals and hunt-partners, as they'd somehow become -- arrived for a routine physical workout, along with several other 3450's and a smattering of older and younger students. An apprentice stopped them near the door, while all the others spread out in the gymnasium, chasing balls, running, or practicing on a strange contraption that had been imported from aliens, called a "two-wheel," or, in the alien language, a "bicycle."

"Twenty-one seven-hundred-ten thirty-four-hundred-fifty, Twenty-one six-hundred-eighty-nine thirty-four-hundred-fifty, and Thirty-six nine-hundred thirty-four-hundred-fifty-two." The apprentice checked their numbers, freshly painted on their shoulders at the beginning of the tenday. "Good. Follow me."

The trio glanced at each other, and followed through hallways, past closed doors. 21-710 hoped that they weren't suspected of cheating on tests. They *hadn't* been, or sie might have thought about running, even though there was no place to run to...

Finally, they arrived in a room with a mirrored wall. 21-710 caught hir breath. One -- or *all* -- of them had attracted the interest of an Adult. Hir palms itched, and sie felt hirself groveling a little.

The room contained two doors (across from each other) a desk and one chair, which the apprentice settled into. "The scout-Matriarch Frasa is looking for one to three apprentices who can work well with others. She has requested that the three of you be tested in a certain way."

The 21's looked at each other warily. In any given test, 36 would take the top place -- it was each other that they had to beat, to take a firm second place.

"The duties of a scout," the apprentice continued, "sometimes involve capturing specimens of alien life for study. There must be care taken to get the very best specimens possible, so that they can be tested in all possible ways by the Matriarch and elder apprentices."

The apprentice took a box out of the desk, with air-holes in it, and reached inside. What was brought out was a small green creature with black eyes, scaled and hexapodal. "This is a Kintaran *merfah*. Three of them have been released in the hunt-grounds outside this room. You will each capture one and present it to the Matriarch, and She will choose which of you -- if any -- She wishes to claim as apprentices."

21-689 asked, "May we be allowed to examine this *merfah* first?"

"No. If this were a truly unknown species, you would not have that luxury. However, a bioscanner will be provided. You may exit the room now." The apprentice pointed at the door opposite the one they'd entered the room from.

36, young and fast, was at the door first, and taking one of the scanners on the table just outside it. Then sie was off, bounding through the hip-tall grass.

21-710 got the second bioscanner, and handed the third to hir year-mate. They blinked at each other a moment. "Cooperation," 21-710 murmured, remembering that the School-apprentice had said "who can work well with others."

"An innovative response," 21-689 replied softly, obviously remembering the same thing. Sie started scanning to one side, and 21-710 took the other. "There," 21-689 said. "Two signs."

21-710 twitched hir tail. "I scan one, and 36." Sie turned and loped after hir age-mate, one eye for the scanner (which did indeed show two *merfah*-sized life-signs).

They paused when the animals scanned as several meters away, and worked into position downwind, creeping forwards in the exciting eternity of a stalk... When they broke for the little merfahs, 21-710 was sure that the creatures were as good as caught. Then the pair of animals *leapt* into the air, almost at chest-height, and bounded away faster than anyone without killing claws could follow. Sie froze in dismay.

So did 21-689, for a moment, then the other student bared hir teeth. "They're *Kintaran* animals -- they have speed, but their stamina for a long chase may be lessened! Let us pursue them!"

"Yes!" And they dashed after the creatures.

It was not easy to tire the merfahs out, but it was eventually done. They picked one, and chased it in turns to save their strength. Finally, 21-689 caught it, hissing in triumph, and raised it to hir mouth to bite its head off.

"Wait!" 21-710 shouted, and the other 21 paused. 21-710 panted, catching hir breath, then explained, "We are to be *scouts*, not hunters."

21-689's eyes widened. "Ahhhhh...." sie breathed as understanding lit hir eyes. Sie took a firm hold on the struggling merfah with both hands. "Let's catch yours, then."

It was not easy -- for one thing, the first-caught beast escaped once, and had to be re-captured -- but finally they both had a squirming, *live* merfah, and headed back.

They got there in time to see 36 offering a limp body to the suited apprentice, who, not being of the family who wanted a new apprentice, did not take it.

The 21's halted next to 36 and groveled as well, holding their live catches firmly. 21-710 saw 36 looking at them, eyes narrowed in puzzlement, then wide in understanding. 36 lowered hir merfah and rocked, crooning sadly.

The apprentice went back inside for a few moments, then out again. "Thirty-six, leave the merfah here, and follow me."

Still clutching the dead merfah to hir chest, 36 cried, "Why? Why? What did I do wrong?"

"You killed it," 21-689 said. "This is *scout* work, and while a dead thing can be tested in many different ways, it cannot be made live again, to be tested as a live creature."

"Besides," 21-710 added, "a truly unknown animal might have been poisonous, or even sentient."

36 crooned and rocked, head curled upside down so that it scraped in the dirt. The apprentice stepped forward and touched the student. "You are still young, and have the reactions of a wild neuter. Your performance was otherwise competent. Put the merfah down, and follow me."

Slowly, fighting instincts, 36-900-3452 put the dead animal on the ground and stood. The apprentice turned and left, and the precocious genius followed.

21-710 thought that failing a test for once might do 36 good, but did not say it, for another apprentice came through the door then, unsuited, wearing only a equipment belt.

The ultraviolet patterns on this apprentice were bright, but clear -- bold stripes along the tail and body, curving into whorls at the chest and neck, with starbursts around the eyes. It was the first time the 21's had seen those patterns, those patterns for *male*, in true color. There was a strange quality in the air, as well, as the *male's* pheromones came to them, the first catalyst to start the Change.

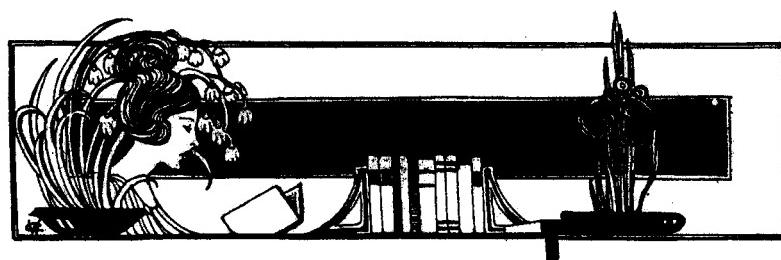
Suddenly, 21-710's mind was blank again, and there were no words as sie offered the apprentice hir live merfah. The apprentice took it, and touched his lips to the animal's neck, then handed the (still living) creature to another apprentice behind him. 21-710 crawled forwards, pressing hir cheek against the apprentice's upper leg as 21-689 went through the same ritual. Sie would Change, now, and not die in convulsions as a neuter. Sie was good enough to live, good enough to breed, *wanted* by a Matriarch. Tensions sie had never realized were hirs relaxed suddenly, as their brother-apprentice stroked hir and hir age-mate's heads.

He turned his head then. "Matriarch."

The two 21's looked up as an Adult appeared in the doorway. This one's ultraviolet markings were bright, but as thin as blades of grass, lacework along the back and sides, along the underside of the jaw, and thicker spirals at the underside base of Her tail. Adult, female, *Matriarch*.

She stepped towards them. "I am Frasa. You," She said, touching 21-710's head, "are my Fifth, and you..." (She touched 21-689) "..are my Sixth. Come. We shall leave now."

Frasa's Sixth stood first. Frasa's Fifth took a moment to breathe in the pheromones of apprentice male and adult female, and then sie -- *he* followed.



The Sign Of The Dancing Priestess #10

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Personal Notes

Well, I wanted to have a life to tell you about, but it's been overwhelmed by work. While there are some good points to this (like a raise and a promotion) right now it mostly feels like a large, frustrating, sack of never ending laundry. Ugh. Fortunately I've managed to avoid all other crises as well. But that really doesn't leave me much to talk about.

As you might guess, my zine will be short this time, restricted mostly to comments. I'll be back in a couple of issues to catch up on the articles. I know that's kind of the reverse of what most people do, but, hey, I'm a unique person, I can do things in unusual ways.

Comments Interregnum #38

Cindy Shettle (Words on the Wing #9): Re: adding more to your article on modular systems... More examples of how modular design affects character creation would be nice. It would also be nice to get some idea of how it works out in play. If characters from two different modules meet, how do they interact - especially how do the different mechanics from the different modules interact, and how does this affect you, the player?

I enjoyed the ending of Tangled Webs. Some of the action sequences were a little unclear, but the trick with the bullet proof vest was neat, and it was well used. You really did create a lot of threads, and tie them all up together at the end. I liked Galen's comment to Adam at the very end too. Someday I'd like to see a Ransley / Horton team-up. It would be interesting to see what they think of their return to life.

George Phillies (Refugee): Things I liked about this installment of The Shining Sea: The Dream sequence, mostly. It was more like a dream, and more subtle than previous ones. Eclipse's explanation to Pickering, especially the comment about winnowing truth from biased, incomplete accounts, and how Eclipse looked for Personae and what she found. Aurora's hints about the past, and how she found them.

Things I didn't like: I didn't like the raid as much, though I think it was well written. You managed to create some suspense, which takes some doing. But it seemed pointless, especially since the Four didn't achieve what they wanted (to get a reputation and / or money). Given the way they feel about 'doing the right thing,' and Salvadore's attack on Comet, it's not out of character for them to feel vindicated by the capture, and want to make sure the law will take care of things. But it is strange that they never notice the effect on their previous plans. Finally, in the paragraph "Salvatore hesitated. The fellow in the light show costume stood in the middle of a cloud of cocaine..." it's the action is unclear.

Re: Pickering and what he believes about the Medford League. Yes, highly trained scientists (and mathematicians) keep multiple hypotheses in mind while awaiting results. In these fields it's useful, and an efficient use of resources. Most people, even scientists, don't, or can't, do this in their personal lives. Even if they take a wait and see attitude, they will have a private opinion which will color their interaction with the other people involved. It's not just a question of manners. If Pickering was more convinced of the hacking hypothesis, he would not involve the army, he would spend energy trying to dash whatever hopes the Leagues gifts have raised, and he would be asking different questions, or the same questions in a different way, without being any less polite. So, it seems to me that how he thinks is more than just a matter of excess intelligence.

Re: Eclipse. For someone who is just a hanger on, with "momentary interests in common" she is surprisingly loyal. Also, they seem to have more of a history than would make this a "momentary" alliance.

Things I liked about Minutegrrrls: Hmm... Well, actually, I am now completely convinced that I don't like either side. Perhaps its appropriate for the EU to be assholes more interested in protocol, and yes men, than negotiation or results, but the Americans don't have to go along with it - alright, maybe they have to go along with it, but they don't have to like it. And all the time avoiding the most interesting part of the story... In some ways this is amusing and ironic. The section is a good, even in some ways realistic, look at diplomacy, and perhaps an excellent satire as well. There are a number of amusing bits - the hobbyists maintaining the 747, the refusal to name delegates, even the rigorous protocol.

Things I didn't like: But overall, the section doesn't work well. It is either too short, without giving enough information about what is really going on, or too long, in which case the salient points could have been inserted as a summary in the beginning of the next scene. Not having seen the rest of the novel it's hard to say which. Some of the things I'd like to know are whether the Americans can call a conference, if there have been a lot of these meetings in the past, and their general tenor / purposes in the past if there have been .

Collie Collier (FireStarter #19): I agree with you about the gaming having sub-classes. I think this is true generationally as well as by type. All of the people we game with are about the same age we are, despite the number of universities nearby. Games are social activities, and now-a-days people seem to socialize with people of their own generation / position in life (except within their own families, or sometimes place of employment) so naturally that's who they feel comfortable gaming with. For that matter, I think it affects Cons as well. Boscon is an older crowd than Arisia, for example. So that cons aren't the best place to gage the average age of gamers. And, of course, some of this mixes type with age - for example CCG players, and LARPers, tend to be younger, since these sub-genres became 'hot' later. Maybe there will be a trend towards parents teaching their children to game, now that gamers are beginning to have children more often. But, other than that, I don't expect gamers to start recruiting the younger generation. It would mean that bucking a larger sociological trend - not impossible, but unlikely. If anyone does recruit younger players, it will be the game companies.

So, here is a question for you, and anyone else who cares to respond. Joe, Cindy, and I are part of a 'game company' at least in as much as we write, publish, and distribute role-playing games. (Yes, they're distributed freely, rather than for profit, but this is because the goal is to enhance gaming, not make money.) What do you think we can / should do to recruit younger players?



You read Anita Blake? Someday, in the unlikely event that I ever learn how to engage in computer chats, perhaps we can get together and discuss why I strongly suspect the character isn't as ethical as she's made out to be. Admittedly, I've only read the first book (they give me nightmares) but it seems to me that Anita's ethics are situational, rather than founded on a specific moral code, and that she reacts, rather than acting, and rarely goes back and considers the consequences of her reactions, or the alternative possibilities. Which does not, in my mind, an ethical character make.

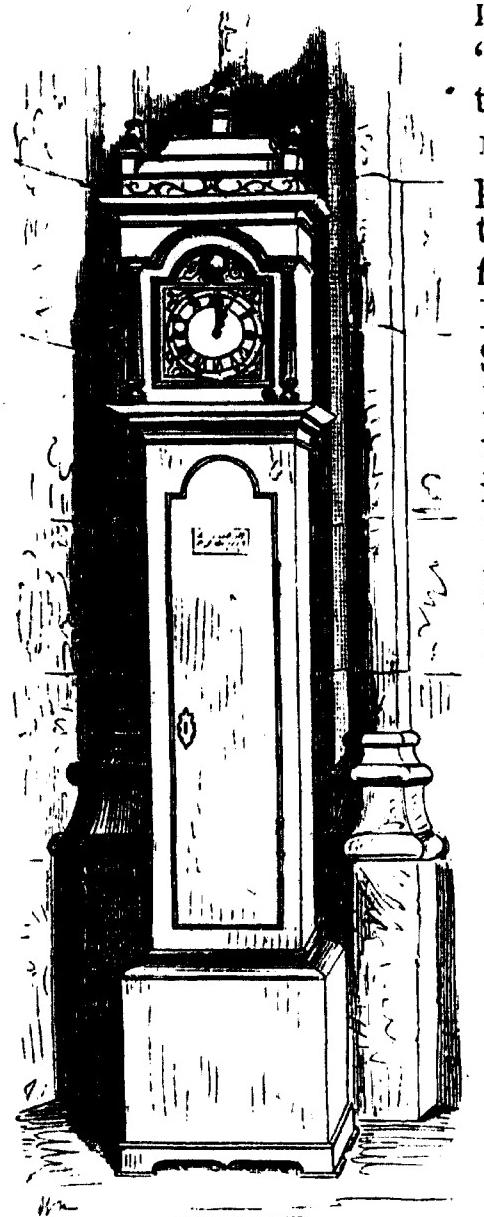
Re: Usually creating female characters. Cindy *always* plays female characters. I play female characters about 2/3rds of the time. I don't think I've ever run into the problems you have (at least not with the GM). Admittedly, in those games where I think the GM or the setting *might* be biased, I usually play male characters. I've never been in a game where I *knew* this was going to be true - in that case I would probably play a female warrior, because someday I want to play the feminist bitch out to change the system, and that's only reasonable if the system obviously needs changing. But most people don't think this would be fun, so although I've tried to set this up occasionally, I've never really succeeded in doing it. And anyway, there are plenty of other female characters to play.

Apparently though, a lot of people run into these problems. It's given as one of the reasons women don't game, so that avoiding it would be one way to entice women into gaming. Unfortunately, that's not easy, since in our culture, and our books and movies, most of the interesting stuff does get done by men. Sometimes I wonder if designing randomized databases to roll up a town's worth of characters isn't a good idea. People might notice how rare good stats are, and how often they end up 'going to' women.

David Hoberman (A Fleet of Stars #1): An excellent zine. Thank you again for the article on Feng Shui. I have not myself had time to look at the game (Joe tends to have more time for these things than I do). And while I usually trust his opinion its nice to have something more to go on than "it's a munchkin fest." Even if the system isn't my cup of tea - I tend to prefer more mechanics, especially in a game where combat is important - I can certainly understand why people would enjoy playing it.

Regarding your comments on professional supers... Or at least professionals with extraordinary abilities. I tend to think they would fall into one of two categories. Those who knew how to market their abilities, or at least come up with creative applications would get rich and retire. Those who didn't wouldn't be much better off than the rest of us, although their abilities might be 'exploited' in unusual ways by the companies they work for. Like the computer revolution, where it wasn't the engineers with the ideas who got rich, but the business men who knew how to market those ideas, paranormal powers wouldn't automatically give control, or status, or money, to the people who possessed them.

I once thought up a story where three people inexplicably acquire "super-powers" for no reason what-so-ever in a world like ours where such abilities are unknown. One thing I wanted to explore is how people choose what to believe, especially how something like paranormal abilities become legitimate and believable in a society that generally consigns them to the National Enquirer. Most books either assume they would immediately be recognized, once someone really has the powers to demonstrate, or that they would never be believed because, no matter how spectacular, they could always be duplicated by techno-tricks and sleight of hand. I think the truth is somewhat more complex. My story starts



with paranormal powers as unthinkable, with some people refusing to believe the evidence of there own eyes, and ends three to five years later with the main character defending her use of those powers (newly revealed to the world at large) in a court of law.

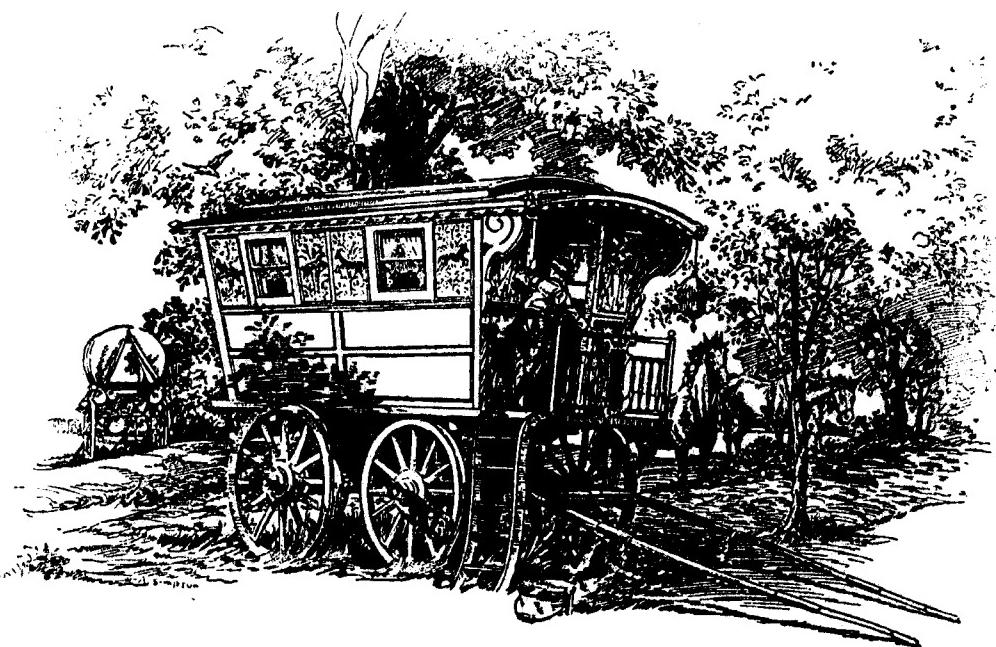
Of course I never wrote it - partly because, if I did it right, it would require a story arc running through several years of a TV series, or the equivalent. But also because the type of 'episodes' I wanted to write didn't center on 'action' but on 'drama'. The kind of things people did in their everyday lives. The kind of trouble they get into - being laid off, or sexually harassed, or dumped by their boyfriend / girlfriend, or whatever. And, I had a hard time seeing how all these violent, destructive, abilities I'd invented for my characters could really help in these sorts of situations.

Oddly enough, one of the other themes of the story was heroism, and how it requires the 'hero' to break down the walls between themselves and another person, usually a stranger, in distress. To act, instead of merely observing in frozen shock, or denying the other as a homeless bum, an alcoholic, a lunatic, someone outside of societies protection, or somebody else's problem. It was this ability, more than their powers, that marked the three main characters. At the time I envisioned the story I thought I, myself, had this quality. Now I wonder... and envy you. Good work.

Joseph Teller (The Swashbuckling Mage Rides Again #9): I'm a little more leery of Christians after they turned on John McCain. All my Christian friends always tell me I shouldn't worry about Pat Robertson, et al. "They're just a vocal but small minority, and anyway I don't agree with him," they say. But when a major political figure makes exactly that point, all the Christians feel they and their leadership have been insulted, and said political figure drops in the polls. Some minority.

On another note... Kindred of the East sounds really interesting. I'd suggest running a game, but from what I've heard the damage system could use some work. Would it be possible to make a convert the setting to our mechanics. Or is that too much work?

I really liked your article on props as well. (The editor in me feels compelled to say it was a tad disorganized). But the gamer is simply amazed at the variety of effects that can be used. Nor did I realize how subtly it can be done either. I've played with at least two of the NPCs you mentioned, and in both cases I didn't notice the 'props' you talk about. They seemed to be a natural extension of the game or character rather than something 'special' added on. Instead of being flashy distractions, they allowed us players to immerse ourselves in game and enjoy what was going on.



REFUGEE

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This Shining Sea

has been e-published professionally. You can download the entire novel for only \$6 from Third Millenium Publications, <http://3mpub.com>. I will try to supply cover art as a sample as the last page of the issue.

MINUTEGRRRLS

Chapter 3

MINUTEMAN HISTORICAL MONUMENT
CONCORD, MASSACHUSETTS
Noon, April 19, 2174

The roar of jet engines, the final trace of the antique aircraft flyover, faded into the distance. A sharp pair of ears could barely hear the low rumble of tanks rolling along in the distance.

Crowds along the road cheered the advancing parade. By tradition more than three centuries old, the march was led by re-enactors in Colonial costume, drums clattering, fifes shrilling, Gadsden flag flapping stiffly in the chill spring breeze. Re-enactors wheeled at the Minuteman statue, presented arms, and continued by the reviewing stand, receiving in turn the salutes of the Governor of the Commonwealth and the 340 members of Great and General Court. A further hundred yards brought them to the William Baptiste Memorial, the stainless-steel statue of a boy strapped to a plank, jaws clenched in agony, eternal flame burning under him as he roasted alive. "Remember!" read the plaque. The re-enactors made their third salute. A few steps and the re-enactors made their final salute, seemingly at random into the crowd. The final salute was the sharpest and longest held.

Charles and Barbara name dutifully returned the marchers' salutes. No matter how thick the crowds, the space around Charles and his beloved was always open. As had been the case every year since they had revealed their other identities, Charles and Barbara were at Concord on Patriot's Day. Charles offered quiet thanks that he could always stand with his back to the Baptiste Memorial. He had watched the boy die. That had been more years ago than he cared to count.

It had been a solid forty years before he could consider eating barbecued meat again. The sight of the flames still brought bile to his throat.

He did not have to remind himself to smile whenever he saluted. The First Barnstable Scouts, fresh in dress uniform with M38 assault rifles at the ready, were the Color Guard for the modern Old Glory, all 137 stars, maple leaves, eagles, and fleur-de-lis worth. To the Scout flag, aged battle ribbon waving gaily in the breeze, he always saluted first. The smart fabric, managing to flap in exact time to the band, looked perfectly natural to the young people around him.

All these years later, Charles still wondered what the French submarine captain had thought he was doing all those years ago. In the early Summer pre-dawn hours Captain deClerk had lost his commandos, lost his submarine, lost most of his crew, and earned a battle ribbon for the First Barnstable Scouts, not to mention farm plots for thirty very young men. On the day he'd landed, most Americans thought the Incursion had ended, guns silenced though there was no peace accord yet. Perhaps Captain deClerk had believed the beach was still a game preserve, so men could land unseen and unopposed. Why had his men landed, then? A wildlife refuge did not appear to be a critical military target worth risking a modern thermonuclear submarine. deClerk's computer files were erased. The survivors of his mission knew nothing, or remained silent.

Charles reminded himself that deClerk was not a complete fool. He had managed to bring his submarine close to the American shore, undetected by the Atlantic sonar curtain. Unfortunately for him, his men had walked directly into ten times their number of Scouts with night scopes and the expectation that they were about to engage holographic targets with live ammunition, as happened on this beach every night of the year.

The medal went to the troop leader who realized that the men on the shore were shooting back with real EU ammunition, the shadow on the water was a real EU submarine, and surfaced submarines can be targeted by antitank rockets. Three dozen direct hits on the submarine led to catastrophic flooding of the sub's upper deck, quenching the boat's fusactor. The submarine promptly turned turtle in shallow water. At dawn's early light the surviving Scouts discovered that they had captured a real submarine, not an unusually well-made simulator.

Charles's attention came back to the present. He had not been quite entirely distracted. He had returned the salutes of unit after unit without being prompted by his wife. For the younger marchers, the privilege of marching in Concord itself was a reward for excellence in their studies. For the Concord Minutemen, it was the privilege of marching in your own town's parade. The final foot units were always MinuteGirls in spring camouflage colors, marching under full kit, ready for battle if you ignored the mint-new red and gold phoenix shawls -- eagle rising triumphant from the flames -- across their shoulders. As they passed Charles, they saluted, freshly-bandaged left hands making half-closed fists. Charles responded in kind, left hand high, fingers open. Their

REFUGEE PAGE 2

scars would soon yield to nanites; the shadow of his would remain. Recalling how his scars had come to be, he decided that voluntarily grasping a branding iron to show your solidarity with a boy a century and a third dead was more patriotism than he had. Even if someone gave him a pretty handkerchief and a dose of anti-shock nanites afterwards.

Pins in his watch tickled his wrist. The people with his telephone number knew precisely where he was and why he was not to be disturbed. His wife's frown, rapidly stifled, showed she had had the same message. He tapped the watch crystal, twice and again. Microcircuits and laser in the frames of his glasses projected a message seemingly in the air before him, carefully not blocking his line of sight.

Marchers were followed by tanks and hover infantry in full armor. Charles glanced at his love, shrug's shadow proposing agreement. She nodded and whispered at the air. The parade would be over in the requested quarter-hour. Their pickup would need that long to arrive. Charles decided that he had heard the Governor's re-election speech an adequate number of times, down to his ritual denunciations of EU terrorists, metricizers, pedophiles, globalists,...

For a moment, Charles was thoughtful. Given the current attitude towards consensual sex, precisely what was the Governor denouncing when he mentioned pedophiles? There had of course been the two fools with baseball bats in the Connecticut quarry last year, who apparently had planned to prey on a pair of MinuteBoys. The fools had apparently failed to note that it was a coed swimming group until the three MinuteGirls in the same swimming party had emerged from the brush and given an object lesson in modern self-defense applications of the MinuteGirl knife, all eleven inches of it. Rape, probably, was the Governor's theme; the Pacification Police had been very fond of that. They had been rather less fond of the aftermath. As President Wilson had once said, apropos of a slightly different European threat, America had an adequate supply of lampposts, of rope, and of patriots to pull on the other end of the rope. Why the Governor felt obliged to denounce the metric system, whose supporters were badly outnumbered by the pedophiles, was less clear. Perhaps it gave the man something to do.

He and his beloved would eventually return to Concord. Their car could wait in the lot. The car with the Massachusetts "ZERO" license plate would be safe anywhere in America, no matter how long it sat there.

Charles firmly resolved not to look over his shoulder at cadence being counted behind him. Someone's formation had been diverted to shoo people off the landing site. Someone's formation had expected to meet parents, not get called on to do useful work. When this was all over, each of them -- whoever it was -- would get a letter of thanks and autographed photo.

The final tanks -- a platoon of M214 Powell lights, laser armor shining mirror-bright -- rattled by. A gust of wind across his back said his ride had landed. Charles took his dear by the hand, braced his smile in place, and turned. An exoatmosphere shuttle floated on contragrav fields, surrounded at a respectful distance by MinuteGirls. Charles began his stroll toward the aircraft, gawking crowd parting like the waters before Moses. He hoped the analogy -- risen out of some stray corner of an overage mind -- was not excessively prophetic. Moses had given sound advice, been rejected by those he sought to lead, and not come to an ideal end.

"Honor Guard! Ten-Hut! Present...Arms!" The bellow was as stentorian as a fourteen-year-old girl could muster, but the collar tabs said Troop Leader, and color-suppressed merit badges on her sash explained why. Two hundred backs came ram-rod stiff. Charles and wife saluted gravely. Charles would always flash grin and thumb's up afterwards; his wife would always complain that he shouldn't. The couple stepped up the boarding ramp and through the airlock.

Doors whisked shut. The waiting General Staff officer dutifully presented them with a small box, black with gold-inlay Presidential seal. The box held a pair of silver collar tabs. Charles fastened the skull to his wife's collar. His wife returned the favor with the circle.

Barbara wondered what was going on. The President knew full well that Charles had dissociated himself from the Popular Army when his identity became public. She had done the same. The President could call them back as advisors, but they had no line authority. Their words were never other than recommendations. The call 'Your urgent attendance is requested on a matter of the highest national importance' said very little.

"Captain Zero? Captain Mors?" Major Niles gestured at a semicircular row of crash couches, leather-tooled, facing the rear of the shuttle. "The President and Senate are most grateful for your assistance." They took their seats, barely feeling the shuttle's acceleration through the contragrav fields. New Washington, Wyoming was scarcely a quarter-hour away -- less if they went supersonic inside the atmosphere. The initial climb was gentle; within a minute the stern port showed they were climbing almost straight up.

"What is the issue?" asked Barbara, her attention tightly focused on the Major.

"I have not been briefed," Major Niles answered. His face reddened. Barbara was as fearsome as her reputation. "Yes, Ma'am! Yes, I remember perfectly well the Security Suppression Act. The issue is not ongoing military operations. That's why there's the hurry. The President wants to be able to say something coherent before he reaches the statutory revelation deadline. There was a meeting with the Euro-

pean barbarians three days ago. One of their delegates was covered with fur."

Barbara and Charles looked at each other. President Schuykill had a record of political ineptitude. Delaying release of records on negotiations with the European Union was going to cost him badly at the polls. Charles responded to his wife's gentle hand pressure. "Major, now, I am old enough to have actually met a European. Many of them, in fact. A respectable number of them were even alive afterwards. It really is an old wives tale that Europeans are furred. A substantial beard and mustache, yes, but..." he shrugged.

"I have seen the photograph," the Major said hesitantly, not sure what would happen if his guests announced that they did not believe him. He couldn't imagine the outcome, but it seemed unlikely to be good for his career. "I confess, however, that my reading -- strictly because of my defense responsibilities, of course -- had always led me to believe that Europeans are *Homo sapiens sapiens*."

"Right there," said Barbara. "Sapiens, capable of rational thought, might be stretching things, but they were *Homo sap.*"

"The delegate," announced the Major, "was not. Human, I mean. A giant cat, legs broken and reset to permit bipedal walking, is how I'd describe it. Radical biosculpt. Radical enough to upset my son, I think, if he'd seen it."

"I see," said Charles. "Well reported, Major. Very well reported. Actually, I don't see. Europeans detest biochemical engineering. At least, they did when we last talked about the issue, half a century ago. Thank you for bringing our attention to the most severe anomalies in the situation." Charles stressed his compliments to the Major's report. At some time in the past Charles had concluded that even if he shot no messengers, his friends would do the shooting for him, given the slightest excuse.

"And they keep complaining we use cloned delegates," continued Barbara. The three of them smiled. "Of course, we could tell them the truth, rather than quoting the Azores Convention at them." She giggled. The Europeans would throw three kinds of fit if they learned the truth. However, the Azores Convention spelled out in extreme detail rules for the conduct of negotiations with the EU. The American delegation might even include her and her husband; the Europeans were obliged not to complain.

"It would not make their day," agreed the Major, "and they'd have something new to complain about."

"There's not a hint they've changed their minds on biology," said Charles. "And morphing a person into a cat sounds hard. Assuming it's even practicable. Why bother? Did she say anything?"

"I gather it spoke fluently," answered Major N. "Albeit with an accent. I'm not sure we know the gender. The given name in the post-negotiation document was ambiguous. I also gather it complained about the disposition of American military forces, giving the President the opportunity to hold these matters close

to his chest for three days."

Charles spread his hands, a gesture of acceptance. He stared out the starboard port, a 1x3 yard section of optical sapphire. They were passing south of the Dakotas, the Bridge of Rainbows rising almost to their 100-mile altitude. The Bridge, besides being a suborbital insertion rail gun, was the second largest dynamic structure in the world. Streams of ceramic blocks hidden in vacuum pipes rose up its underside, travelling at miles per second, only to be forced by magnetic confinement structures to turn groundwards, there to be recaptured and fed again into one of the rising streams. The force of the blocks on the confinement structures supported the Bridge in mid air. Other blocks, counter-rotating, were used by the rail gun as a momentum sink, so the momentum being transferred into a launching spaceship could be drawn from outside the Bridge superstructure. The entire system was enormously redundant, backed by designs permitting the bridge to fail gracefully, as had happened twice. 'Newton's Arch' was the original name for the Bridge, but an inspired exterior coating coupled to the meteorological consequences of a 200 mile long structure that protruded beyond the Earth's atmosphere gave the bridge its popular name. Charles decided he preferred the more expensive, but in principle safer, contra-gravity shuttle.

Barbara resisted grating her teeth. She had supported, privately, President Schuykill's election campaign. He had seemed to be a very reasonable fellow, all things considered. In practice, he put 'don't rock the boat, don't upset people, we know what's best' far ahead of a position that any decent patriot could accept. He had already barely dodged impeachment over accusations he had attempted to raise -- properly using lawfully appropriated funds -- a standing army. Furious backpedalling and protestations of misunderstanding, followed by an extremely contrite apology, had barely saved his hold on the Round Office. If the President now appeared to be in violation of the Security Suppression Act, by claiming the government had a right to withhold information from the American people, his remaining tenure in office would be quite short. Allowing, that is, that he lived long enough for the legal processes to be completed.

"So what's on the agenda?" asked Barbara innocently. Her dear spouse was woolgathering, as usual missing an opportunity to collect intelligence.

Major Niles looked thoughtful. "A briefing by Secretary of State Cornelius with tape of the negotiating session. Cornelius wants to do one briefing for everyone. It'll be another hour for Solar Navy to have the last of their people here, so there'll be a buffet and chance to talk first. I have a roster of attendees." He passed a list.

Barbara spoke half to herself. "State Department. War Department. Navy, Air Force, Solar Navy, Coast Defense Artillery. Senate. Congress. Half-a-dozen intelligence corporations. Various experts on Europe. Guests

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by
encrypted distanced viewing. Morbius? How'd you get him out of retirement?"

"Experts. None of whom have been to Europe," noted Charles. "Most of whom weren't born when the Continental Defense Screen went up. I assume someone paid Morbius a retainer."

"Popular Army? And us," finished his other half.
"We're not official, not most of the time, not any more."

"Not officially," noted the Major. "But the briefing has to go public by 8:30 this evening, and it will. I gather that the President felt your opinion would calm that segment of the populace that prefers your judgement to those of their elected officials."

Chapter 4

ACHESON HALL,
GREAT SQUARE OF THE REPUBLIC
NEW WASHINGTON, WYOMING
8:30 PM, April 19, 2174

The buffet was as excellent as Barbara had expected. Secretary Cornelius was wealthy, even by modern American standards. His contribution to President Schuykill's election theme 'Excellence in All Things' had been gastronomic revival. 'American Food -- the Best in the Universe' promised to set a public example. It was an esoteric campaign plank, but it was not as though a Secretary of State had significant other duties.

Barbara surveyed the room. She always dressed stylishly. The military officers had had enough warning to break out their best, Navy and Air Force and Solar Navy in dark and light blue and black, Coast Defense Artillery in white resplendent with gold trim. White and Gold always looked impractical to Barbara. However, she recalled, if your primary mission was controlling the Continental Defense Screens from underground headquarters, with no possible contact with weather or machinery, uniform maintenance ceased to be a major constraint. Her dear spouse had worn an excellent copy of the clothing he had worn for their first Liberation Day march down Pennsylvania Avenue. Fortunately, everyone knew what he would be wearing.

Secretary Cornelius took the rostrum, pulled pocket-watch from vest pocket to check the time, and struck his wine glass twice with a gold-washed spoon. Reminded of the glass's contents, he paused to take an ostentatious sip of the umber liquid, a 27-year-old Washington State trockenbeerenauslese, and waited for his guests to order themselves. Charles looked longingly at the buffet, notably those of the quail eggs stuffed with salmon caviar that had yet escaped his notice, but gave his attention instead to his host. His dear other half had positioned herself against a side wall where she could watch Secretary Cornelius and his audience at the same time. Cornelius interrupted Charles' thoughts:

"Fellow Americans! An urgent situation requiring your advice and counsel has arisen. The latest meeting at the Azores Negotiation Facility was quite hostile. Let us first see a tape of the session." The Hall darkened. A holodisplay repeated the meeting from the perspective of the Senior American Delegate.

Secretary Cornelius stopped the tape. "The large colony in question, 4 light years out, is undoubtedly the planet Lincoln, and its 18 states of our Republic. Needless to say, we did not use the European point-less space travel confusion to go there, so we will categorically reject their claims, for which they have no evidence. It may be the case that even a group as dimwitted as the EU barbarians is eventually going to conclude we have an efficient method of travelling hither to thither, not to be confused with their inefficient and dangerous method. I infer they have not yet done so."

Barbara glanced left and right. The EU delegate had just said something significant, namely that someone with starships had allied itself with the EU. Who? A number of other powers had starships, but which of them was calling itself an EU ally? To her recollection, none of them were fond of biosculpt. None of the people she had been watching showed surprise at the statement. Of course, most Americans were totally disinterested in the affairs of foreign nations, but this was a select audience. Why was a delegation from this nation, whatever it was, not represented formally at the meeting? Unless, of course, the furry European was in fact a European?

Barbara shook her head. Whatever benefit the Azores negotiations might once have had, a century later the two sides had trouble agreeing on the compass direction in which the sun rose. She looked for audience reaction. So far as she could tell, the Secretary's remarks to date had generated appropriate levels of surprise at appropriate times. She didn't expect anyone to be hiding a deliberate cease-fire violation.

Secretary Cornelius nodded at an officer in the black, gold, and tricorne hat of the Solar Navy. "Commodore Jacobsen?" he asked.

The highest-ranking officer of the American Solar Navy looked over the crowd. "The ASN has had no report of this incident. However, there's only one system four light years from here. That's Centauri. At the present time, the Sun is in a sidelobe point for the tunnel between us and Lincoln, so there are substantial communication delays. If the event had been reported instantly -- not a safe assumption -- we would receive the message torpedo no later than two days hence. The Solar Navy will keep you apprised of events."

Barbara nodded in agreement. This whole exercise might have been a European effort to pry out information about Pontefract tubes. If the Europeans didn't know about tube travel, they would view Cen-

tauri as being months and months away for American spaceships. A primary objective of American diplomacy was of avoid disabusing the Europeans of their prejudices.

Secretary Cornelius looked across the room. "The current thought of the Administration is to respond to the third European offer by congratulating the EU delegation on gaining a sense of humor. Naturally, there is no thought of complying with the European demand." Barbara watched intently. The Administration had not required several days in order to reject the European proposal out of hand. Something else was afoot. "We had reached this conclusion even before we read the detailed European proposal, copies of which are being distributed to you, and -- before the statutory hour -- to the press. Especially interesting was the demand that, before withdrawal, American Solar Navy shore detachments were to *disarm* American citizens who remained behind. The proposal also compared American forces with EU replacement forces, which consistently had a large quantitative superiority over our garrisons -- according to the Europeans. Commodore Jacobsen?"

Grand Admiral Daniel Jacobsen doffed his tricorne. "Mr. Secretary, the distinguished minds here may reach their own conclusions, but in my opinion the list of European forces, arrival dates on station, and so forth was meant to imply that if we do not withdraw, we shall be attacked. It appears likely -- since otherwise they would have staged another surprise attack -- that the Europeans actually want us to depart of our own volition. We thus have considerable time to effect such preparations as the Administration may identify. Of course, attacking a fortified planetary position from space is believed to be one of the less fruitful occupations known to man. In the distinguished words of a great sailor who had the misfortune to be born in Europe, no sailor but a fool takes his ships against a fortress, a precept as true now as when ships used sails and floated on water. Our citizens in the Kuiper belts are more exposed."

Barbara kept her own council. Approaching a planet at high speed was ineffective, but a victorious space navy could advance to a hover above a planet and land troops. She remembered to smile at the aide handing her a dataplate.

"In any event," announced Cornelius, "I have now presented -- and the American public will hear before the appointed hour -- what the Europeans have said to us. The Administration will undoubtedly be grateful for your advice and counsel on the apparent European threat of renewed war. There are full simulation facilities available elsewhere in the building. For those of you of more practical bent, the buffet will soon be renewed. For those of you wishing to consult with third parties, the embargo ends in another 45 minutes."

Barbara stared at the handwritten note with her dataplate. Gold ink on apple-green paper was a trifle rich for her taste, but most of a century's tradition lay behind the President's personal missive. "...I rely upon

you to give the most fundamental consideration..." was sincerely meant as warm praise. "Charles, Dear, when we may I believe we should put in a call to Doctor Morbius." Barbara's husband nodded and shrugged assent. They were supposed to provide outside-the-continent advice, and this situation was truly outside the continent.

* * * * *

MINUTEMAN HISTORICAL MONUMENT CONCORD, MASSACHUSETTS

7:40 PM, APRIL 19, 2174

Shortly after sunset, a contragrav shuttle again hovered over Concord Common. Barbara wished that the place could have been deserted, so no one would see her after eight hours in the same change of clothes. Charles looked completely unsurprised at the troop of MinuteGirls waiting to receive them. He handed his wife from the craft, paused, whispered to the Troop Leader "Do you have a second here?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" Charles estimate of her competence went up several notches; the answer had been as soft a whisper as his question.

"If you could leave her in charge for a moment, I have a couple of questions," he said as gently as possible.

"Yes, sir." Much more loudly, "Bianca, you have formation watch." Her voice did not quite break. Not quite. What had she done?

"Nothing is wrong," Charles announced, forestalling her panic. He gestured and led her off a distance. However, you did stay here for me, so now I am responsible for you. Is there home transportation, it being well after dark?"

"Bivouacked at the monument, sir. Overnight," she answered.

"You ate?" he continued. "I trust you. However, when something is your responsibility,..." he left a gap in his words.

"Check, don't assume." She realized that she had just interrupted the highest-ranking officer of the Popular Army. Charles gave her the thumb's up. "Cold rations at 4, then when you're on your way."

"Hmmh," announced Charles. He looked at his beloved. "Now, it so happens that a half-mile north of here is an all-night pancake establishment. Of course, if I pick up the tab your unit will have to suffer through two very old veterans -- namely Kapitan Mors and Captain Zero -- telling educational anecdotes of the Popular War. It will undoubtedly bore you to tears. Perhaps the pancakes will be fair compensation. Does that meet with your approval?" He paused. "It's your unit. Your privilege to see a more pressing duty."

"Please?" She asked. Charles considered her tone

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of voice, and noted that a century of radical change had left girls her age as able as ever to wrap young men around their fingers. He nodded. She leaned over her shoulder.

"Formation! Fall in! Full march gear!" Seeing his puzzlement at the last phrase, she continued, "Well, I'm not leaving someone here to guard bedrolls, and I'm for sure not leaving them unguarded." She raised her voice. "Point and Flank! Deploy!"

"Very good!" said Barbara. She hadn't said a word thusfar. There was a point at which positive reinforcement of good decisions became desirable. Charles was not exactly bad for discipline, but he could be more constructive. Now it was

clear why Charles had confirmed that Morbius wanted such a late hour to meet, and why Charles had spent ten minutes calling up data on nearby restaurants, while steadfastly denying that he wanted to eat.

An hour and a quarter later, a dozen well-fed and fantastically happy MinuteGirls lined the sidewalk outside O'Flan-aghan's American Pancake Home. Barbara had summoned the car for her and Charles; soon enough it would come to them. Charles was telling a final anecdote, dwelling on changes he'd seen in nearly two centuries of active life. "...and before the Invasion, the idea of people your age with access to alcohol would have caused consternation. Seventy years ago, I would have had to remind typical MinuteGirls -- maybe not honor units like the Phoenix Guides -- that you had full combat loads for the parade, and alcohol and ammo do not mix. By thirty years ago, no one your age really believed what I just said about the distant past. And in a few decades, you'll find the younger generation doesn't believe you either." Charles' car rolled to a stop at his shoulder. He flashed a salute and followed his beloved into the car's passenger section.

The door whisked shut. Barbara had already confirmed the destination was set. She approved the AI's choice of route, leaned back in a reclining seat, and turned to face her husband. "Now, I suppose there's some explanation for all that?" she asked.

"After all we'd done to disrupt the young ladies' days, we owed them something, didn't we?" Charles asked innocently. "Besides, the delay on the Lincoln gate really is quite predictable. Uncertainty of several days, indeed! That's officially correct, but citing regulation the Space Navy having back at State and the New White House for their budget cuts. By the time we're reaching the Morbius estate, he'll be having the message torpedo signals decoded."

Barbara leaned back. Charles wouldn't recognize human intelligence data until it bit him, but with technical intelligence he was a wizard. A message and supplements from Morbius scanned across a flatscreen. His guests. A very interesting list of guests. New Washing-

ton would have been quite surprised, if they were allowed to think that it was any of their business. A time -- *still* in the future -- before which guests were unlikely to arrive. An agenda. And, exactly as her beloved had predicted, the estimated hour at which the torpedo message would be decoded.

Chapter 4

THE PALAZZO MORBIUS RUTLAND, MASSACHUSETTS 9:40 PM, April 19, 2174

The Palazzo Morbius perched across a hill, its three stories of glass-paneled front peering down over elaborate gardens to a small lake. Most of Morbius' neighbors had homes in American Federal style, with massive earth berms -- more often than not hiding an armored core -- surrounding a glassed atrium or half-open courtyard. Those homes were half- or more buried. In well-illumined contrast the Palazzo thrust up at the sky, shouting its defiance of historical memories of the European Incursion.

Illumined? wondered Barbara. Actually Morbius loved the night sky. Lighting like this was unusual, something he put on only for major events. While her dear husband had been telling anecdotes--albeit carefully chosen, interesting, and educational anecdotes, some of which she hadn't heard before -- Morbius had been making video calls, preparing to receive guests, and with some luck decoding the message torpedo download. Barbara had let Charles do the talking. It was his strong point. She had sat in the background re-examining the European proposals.

It had, recalled Barbara, been Morbius who had recognized that in a country whose female population was routinely raped by the occupiers that young women were the obvious core for the Popular Army. His genius lay in recognizing precisely how his potential recruits were to be activated, trained, armed, and set into operation. Well over a century later, Morbius's gatehouse was still manned by a pair of MinuteGirls--no, tonight make that one MinuteGirl, one MinuteBoy, and someone from the women's militia only safely called the MinuteMoms behind their backs---all three in power armor and full kit.

The gate electronics passed them without question. Charles waved to the guards. The presence of the trio drew a stretch of question marks from Barbara. Charles appeared to be oblivious to the obvious questions. Perhaps gender rivalry between the MinuteGirls and the MinuteBoys had softened in the past half-century. Nonetheless, they generally stayed well apart. On the other hand, MinuteBoys did not generally rate power armour. The fellow might have earned the respect of the people he was with.

They walked up the long drive. Charles waited

until out of earshot of the gatehouse before posing his question: "Barbara, dearest? The young lady from the Women's Citizen's Forces? Was she to keep the other two from shooting each other? Or has someone issued antimatter weapons to the militia?"

Barbara grated her teeth. Charles always appeared oblivious, even to the sun rising in the west. But he did spot the technical explanation for a MinuteMom's presence; atomic napalm projectors really did need a lot of training to handle effectively. She smiled and shrugged innocently.

Morbius, hopelessly unstylish in violet academic robes and opera cape, waited for them at his front door. "Charles!" They clasped hands. "Barbara!" He bowed, kissing the air over her fingers. "So long since we last visited!" He whisked them into his home.

Morbius's study was a three floor atrium, walls cascaded with hanging plants. A soft bubble was a trio of thirty-foot multi-tier waterfalls, whose passages back and forth incidentally watered the plants. His guests were spread across a second floor balcony. Barbara identified most of them at sight.

Steven Piper, gravitational engineer. Fidelity Blake, Morbius' astrographer friend from the Free University of New Hampshire, her academic robes a swirl of golden fall leaves and black branches against bright-blue sky. Melissa McGuire, modern analytic historian and author. Daniel Jacobsen, now in civilian clothing, only a service ring to mark his rank in the American Solar Navy. Kirby Lee, warfare analyst, Platte Institute. Two women wearing the colors of an Intelligence Corporations -- IOneU, which was privately held again. Barbara smiled. She'd made a killing on the buyout. At the far end of the balcony were a MinuteBoy and MinuteGirl she didn't know, both in light-green informal dress uniforms, working shoulder to shoulder at a cluster of a dozen data screens. She stared at their merit badges. They were Morbius's interns, a position you kept if you worked very hard, very effectively, all the time. Peering over their shoulder was a much older man in dark trousers, silver-lattice on gray sweater matching his silvering hair. Barbara's eyebrows went up. The game collector and strategic theorist who styled himself Lord of the Hexagon was a recluse who almost never left California. The guest list mentioned an electronic presence, and a displayed blank icon. Peter Gustafson had excellent reasons for not travelling, would likely say nothing tonight, and would tomorrow have more insight into what needed be done than any three other people.

Morbius gestured them at a table of refreshments. "Sandra? Grant?" His interns looked over their shoulders. "How is the analysis doing?"

"The Europeans see through Silver-Two deceptions," said Grant. "Their deployments seem set to beat us -- well, us if Silver-Series were our real forces."

"But not through the Gold Series -- well, Gold One is ambiguous, but there seems to be a response to Gold-Nine," continued Sandra Miller.

"Silver Series they were supposed to see through,"

said Jacobsen, "so that's a plus. Our plan worked. We gave them deceptions they'd penetrate," he reminded Grant, "or they'd get suspicious they were missing something. And Gold-Nine is Mercury?" Sandra nodded agreement. "They know Mercury is lynchpin of our economy, so expect it's massively defended."

"They know about Pontefract Tubes?" Grant Thomas sounded startled.

"Unlikely," answered Steven Piper. "They aren't running any. We'd detect them. But they see mining operations, Poniatowski collectors and heat dumps, ship traffic coming and going. We mask what we're carrying, but a hundred million ton starship is just too much to hide. They know Mercury is heavy industry, lots, but only see a modest tonnage reaching Earth."

"They think we're poor," reminded Melissa McGuire, "That's stock phrasing in their teledramas, which they still don't encrypt. They think they are lots richer than us---unless their whole satellite broadcast video system is being faked for our benefit. That's an even-money bet. They don't wonder how Mercuric industry can ship high-tonnage goods to us: they don't think Mercuric industry is that big."

"Clarify?" The Lord of the Hexagon was very soft-spoken. "Basis for determining which deceptions are broken?"

Sandra Miller lead the watchers through a series of screens. Here was Ceres. There was the European list of the Ceres Defense Forces, or so the Europeans claimed to have estimated. Here were the various levels of deceptions, each set to mask different parts of American Forces near Ceres. The Silver deceptions were meant to be penetrated by the EU; the Gold deceptions were meant not to be penetrated. Sandra made the comparisons. The EU estimates matched forces they were supposed to see if they penetrated the Silver-One and Silver-Two maskirovka and no more.

"We did more extensive correlations," continued Grant Thomas. "You get the same picture all the places we looked except Mercury. That they reckoned as very heavily defended."

"Very good," announced Morbius. "And auto-gaming against their attack forces? Does their attack work?"

"Simulations under way," announced Sandra Miller. There was the slightest smirk on her lips when she looked at Grant Thomas. "Stochastics take a while, and I'm simulating the whole system at once." Barbara wondered if anyone else had caught the obvious. Someone had recognized what needed to be done next, and someone else hadn't anticipated what Morbius would ask after he learned which deceptions were working,

"What was the first outcome?" asked Jacobsen innocently.

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"Sir, with full surprise and perfect luck, EU lost. But they took Venus and Jupiter, and wrecked up Mercury pretty thoroughly. That run is channel 17 if you want to see it."

"First things first," announced Morbius. "We have the message torpedo data from Lincoln, and decrypting is almost complete." He gestured over a touch screen. The rear windows filmed over, turning silver-white. Room lights dimmed. "There's an optical record from the Flagship's Bridge, and a stack of analysis files."

The eleven watched from Isandhlwana's Bridge as the EU squadron came and went, then began reading the analysis files. Servitrons replenished the side table, which remained heavily under siege by the two interns. An hour later, Morbius interrupted: "Are we ready for summaries? Mr. Lee?"

Kirby Lee looked politely about the room, giving the company his professional smile. "The Lincoln Planetary Fleet did superficial tech analysis. Actually, pretty good tech analysis. EU screens are about as expected. Screens on unknowns are substantially better. Mogadishu got a short multi-grazer hit on an unknown picket. That would have significantly damaged a Prince Edward -- we think -- the unknown had no hull damage -- we think. Soliton antitorpedoes -- Lincoln's are not very modern -- were marginal to ineffective. Ter-Minassian's use of illuminated plasma clouds to mask vessels and torpedoes behind them -- Lincoln PDF had written up the tactic, and mostly been ignored -- worked. EU antitorpedo defenses engaged Anaximander torpedos only well after they'd cleared the plasma cloud. I'll need to game a bit to be sure, but the usual estimate that we want a 10:1 hullweight advantage in any engagement seems to hold up. In short, no real surprises -- except the unknown ships."

Daniel Jacobsen received Morbius's nod. "Fleet tactics executed as I would expect by a first line operation on a tight budget. The loss of signal from Anaximander is bad luck -- Lincoln PDF readiness stats are about as good as you get. Ter-Minassian was best in a decade's classes at the Federal Staff College. It showed in his officers. Tomorrow morning we'll have reconnaissance data on the systems beyond the warp point. People may now see the utility of having watch posts on the far sides of system warp points, and perhaps in a layer of systems further out."

"How did they find Lincoln?" inserted Steven Piper. "We don't give them data on our warp points."

"They might reached Alpha Centauri via an off-axis warp transit," noted Fidelity Blake. "I've written several papers on that. Go to the other end of any Sol warp point, displace 4 light years real-space in the direction Alpha Centauri lies from Sol, go through a nearby warp point using settings that would have carried you back to Sol through your original warp point -- you might reach Alpha Centauri. Mostly,

you disappear, but you might come back there."

Flora Barnes cleared her throat and shifted her cape, setting its IOnEU colors all ashimmer.

"Perhaps we should focus more on the unexpected," she said. She paused to see if her audience was paying attention, especially Steven Piper. This was going to be a long posting in New England, and Piper was unattached. Captain Zero noted her implied question and raised one eyebrow. "We see many EU surprises. Short-wave radar. Boron fusactors. Dodecahedral hulls with no -- apparent -- extension spines. The technical advances in acceleration compensators and torpedos -- that's just keeping even with us, I think. And the EU delegate -- the biomorph. They've never shown the least interest in those biotechniques. What they displayed is ... eerie. Drastic change in negotiating stance. Suddenly, they want our worlds."

"Hulls are Steven's specialty, aren't they?" Morbius's question was not quite rhetorical, nor was Piper's presence accidental. The EU delegates had presented highly edited tapes of the engagement -- enough to prove combat had occurred -- showing a nominally EU ship of highly peculiar hull shape being struck by grazer beams. Morbius had summoned Piper in response.

"That's true," Piper answered softly. He hated being put on the spot. He'd already read the reports, considered what needed doing, and checked out the people. Morbius and Blake were a pair. Charles and Barbara had been in love before 90% of their fellow citizens were born. Morbius's MinuteGirl intern was definitely a hot item, but older guys in their right mind let girls wearing the Phoenix Shawl initiate action. The turndowns were sometimes...adrupt. Arthur Smith, Lord of the Hexagon -- whose tastes didn't run that way -- was even spookier than his reputation, which was saying a very great deal. He smiled at Flora Barnes.

"and?" prodded Morbius, wondering where Piper's mind was. Steven was a living Renaissance engineer, but he got a bit distracted.

"Dodecahedra? The hull shape is novel. I've no idea how good it is. The ability to accelerate in multiple directions without turning -- not all directions, if I've analyzed them right -- is new. It's tactically very useful; they can shift power a lot faster than we can pivot a two million ton hull and its acceleration axis. That means they can get a bit closer before our grazer fire is effective. The warp transit was anomalous too; that's subject to numerical analysis."

"All these new things. Why give them away?" asked Tina Truong, the younger but not more junior IOnEU specialist. "They were EU secrets. Why tell us? Distraction? Advertisement? Flaunting EU technical superiority, as if we didn't know they were way ahead of us, and they didn't know that we know?"

"Error," said the Hexagon Lord. He asked him-

self how he could lure the discussion away from technical issues that the military and intelligence corporations could handle. It was the off-continent questions that were important. "Forcing too much data to be consistent. All is consistent with Lincoln being a chance blunder, not related to other issues, as I said earlier. They didn't plan on showing us these things, but now have done so. The dates -- they do reveal transit time from Alpha Centauri through wherever to Sol via EU methods. Several days. That's respectable for them, based on historical evidence. They must fly cross-system, warp point to warp point, multiple times."

"Then how did they find Lincoln?" asked Charles.

"They might have been looking for additional warp lines to Sol," answered Fidelity Blake. "It's not surprising they found something close. That's a symmetry argument." She took a moment to recognize that only the Lord of the Hexagon was nodding agreement. "Otherwise warp lines would uniquely be dense near Sol. That can't be."

"What about the negotiations?" asked Charles. "I suppose it's been a while since I was a delegate personally, back before they knew who I was, but the whole tone of that meeting was strange."

"A while," Barbara snorted. "A century and a half? Before the final Convention was signed? The biomorph threw off the tone. Except they know we refer everything to New Washington, and they refer all to Berlin and Paris. Confusing our delegates won't get them an advantage. At best, if our people get confused, we need to recycle the meeting a week later to discuss implications of the previous session."

"I was referring more to the content than the EU style," Charles answered. "If they want a delegate to wear a fur suit, he wears a fur suit."

"Not a suit, Charles," said Barbara. "His arms bent all wrong ways."

"Returning now to the content of the talks, we have...oh, who hasn't said anything directly yet?" Morbius pointed sequentially at the Melissa McGuire, the Lord of the Hexagon, and the two interns. Morbius noted that neither of the interns flinched when being put on the hot seat. If they didn't make fools out of themselves, he'd have to compliment them later.

McGuire perched her chin on her interleaved fingers. "The main question -- why this ultimatum? Lincoln could be an accident. But why is their response to a minor shooting engagement to demand that we hand over the entire solar system? It's not as though they lost a bunch of ships, the way they did at Second Charon."

"No plan is so frightening as a fortunate coincidence," observed the Lord of the Hexagon. "Three months ago, the Clarksburg warp destination was empty. That's robot probe data. Three months is not much time to set up bases and a fleet. That's plenty of time for a reconnaissance squadron to come through from several warps away. The EU ultimatum reads

like they were surprised to discover Lincoln was not empty."

"Was this an effort to find out about Pontefract tubes?" Charles asked. "They know the travel times via hyperspace. If we already knew about the Lincoln shootout, we have a faster way to get here and there. We do. Pontefract tubes. Are they really secret? If we can hide the Pontefract effect from them, perhaps they can hide from us that they know about them. Our secret is a lot harder to hide. But if they know, why aren't they more curious about them?"

"What are the European strategies?" asked McGuire. "What do they want? They're greedy. They want our worlds. They thought they had the warp net, so they owned all stars -- more or less -- and are miffed they don't. They thought they gave us the loser worlds in this system, kept the best for themselves. Now they want our share, too. Complaining we shot at each other -- totally routine, not interesting. Article 599 -- why was it mentioned? Why not just claim we're all war criminals, like they did last time? Captain Mors, you negotiated Article 599. What were you thinking when you did it?"

"Escape clause," she answered. "Also, I expected at war's end that we'd return after a bit to open diplomatic, trade, travel relations. Article 599 is a path to open those." Grant Thomas's jaw dropped. "Well, it is, go back and read the language. With an open mind. Azores covers all contingencies, not just the ones that turned out to matter. I didn't expect something different was happening until, oh, the first half-dozen Senators had been assassinated for advocating diplomatic relations with foreign countries -- that took a decade, after all." It was always so easy, she considered, to shock the younger generation.

"'We want your worlds' is not a synonym for 'a hundred fifty years ago, we made a mistake, can we start over?'" said the Hexagon Lord. "Not in two centuries of diplomatic games have I heard anything so strange, even including the seven-player Diplomacy alliance against another player." Sandra Miller peered at him. Diplomacy was a seven-player game. He smiled back, whispering 'ask after, amusing tale'.

"Just ask the EU?" proposed Sandra. "Make them name their mutual security threat?"

"How can there possibly be a mutual security threat?" challenged Jacobsen. "Their foes -- if they had any -- would be our allies."

"Perhaps the sun is going nova? I don't know. Your imagination doesn't limit their strategic analysis. Principle 37 of Successful Gaming:" Sandra glanced back to the Lord of the Hexagon. A trace of a smile passed her lips. "I read your new book. The other side can surprise you and find what you missed. That's why it's called 'surprise'. Besides, they might have bad analysis, be diagnosing a change in kilt lengths as a major security threat."

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"The cat," said Grant Thomas. "There must be other clues the EU is doing biosculpt biotech." He caught the IOnEU representatives shaking their heads. "Is their secrecy that good? How did we miss it?"

"We don't make mistakes that big," objected Tina Truong. "There's a sampling program. We get pollen, birds, insects blowing through the continental defense screen. We do lots of biowarfare searches. There's nothing exotic."

"Perhaps, being off the continent, it wasn't a biosculpt," proposed Sandra. "Perhaps it came that way. Just because we've only found sterile worlds around other stars doesn't mean they're all sterile." The rest of the room frowned at her. Morbius had disapproved of her hobby, but reading science fiction could not be said to be European. She frowned back. "Did you want off the continent or not?" She reminded herself to be analytical. The Lord of the Hexagon actually smiled approvingly -- or was he putting a hit on her?

"We did," said Morbius approvingly. "And your suggestion is at least as sound as an unknown EU biosculpt program. Grant?" He turned on his second intern.

"Off the continent the other way. The tabby that talks is an amputee in furry power armor. Like yours, Sandy, except cuddly. The Lincoln entry is part of the attack they're preparing. They had ten minutes to spy out Lincoln -- what could they learn in ten minutes, give or take?" Grant asked.

"A fair amount," remarked Jacobsen. "I'll be able to say more when the ASN eventually gets its chance at the data."

"Say again?" asked Barbara.

"My civilian superior directed -- while waving a draft budget -- that State take top billing on working over the data -- because this is purely a diplomatic misunderstanding. We're ordered not to look at the Lincoln data for a few days -- officially ordered, signed, stamped, and sealed. State's analysts are trying to identify the names of the EU warships from their IFF responders. Names reveal the EU diplomatic stance."

Tina Truong buried her head in her hands. "That's never ever worked. Discrediting that idea is the first bit of homework given to every IOnEU intern."

"It is my sworn duty to endorse the wisdom of my civilian superiors," said Jacobsen. "And for three days not a finger will be raised officially to do an official analysis of the data. I was even ordered to go on leave so that I can't tell my Warrant Officers what I am not seeing them do." He looked piously skyward. "Of course, in peacetime I do write my own leave orders." He clasped his hands in prayer. "I told my subordinates precisely and exactly in full and complete detail what sort of

things I am not allowed to catch them doing. But why did the EU run so fast, and not say anything? A little talk would have given them at least 20 minutes more scanning. A 'we're sorry...we'll pay reparations...one of our ships has shorted a jump capacitor...we'll leave as fast as we can.' would have given them a couple hours."

"We can't ask the EU for several days, until the next Azores session," observed Arthur Smith. "And we here won't script the American remarks at that meeting. What else can we glean from the EU remarks, remembering they were totally scripted? I made a few notes...In particular, they went out of their way to behave as though they thought we colonized Centauri by travelling through hyperspace. Note they identified Centauri only as warp grid coordinates, not as a place. Only one of them remembered how far away Centauri is from Earth; none of them ever used the name."

"What did the cat mean 'in your years'?" asked Grant Miller from his corner of the room. "Is there another year? I mean, we're on the same planet, the EU year has got to be like ours. Doesn't it?"

"The EU calendar differs from ours when it computes leap years," noted Flora Barnes. "That difference doesn't crop up until 3400 AD. So why didn't they say Alpha Centauri, not that bunch of numbers?"

"Perhaps they think light years is like using kilometers and not leagues, something that we wouldn't do. They might have thought they would say "four light years" and we wouldn't understand without translation. They refuse to understand why our American Standard Units are better than their Imperial French units, and assumed that the rest of them are odd, too," suggested Kirby Lee.

"What's this about confiscating weapons?" asked Grant.

"Grant!" Sandra did no quite shout. "They're Europeans. They rape people. Boys like you too, Grant. They know, they try it, MinuteGirls and MinuteMoms blow their heads off. They want us unarmed when they try." Sandra paused. Had she gotten a bit overheated? She looked away from Grant. Every woman in the room except one was giving her a thumb's up.

Kapitan Mors nodded gravely. "Also, the Europeans are hoplophobes. It's a teachable mental disease. That was a, not the, reason for the Incursion."

"Who is allied with them?" asked Tina Truong. "That cat-delegate is strange."

"In military technology we'd call that a list question," said Kirby Lee. His notepad projected a mapholo against the far wall. "Places with starships. Places with good genetech. Places we think talk nice to Europeans." Three overlapping sets of countries were labeled in three colors. "That's not

real helpful. Most East Asian places wouldn't take well to our furry friend. Most places friendly with the EU copy EU opinions of genetech and biosculpt."

"Go back a moment," said Jacobsen. "About weapons. Our EU friends are not Vikings -- the Incursion wasn't officially 'pillage, burn, kidnap pretty girls'. It was 'make our American friends better'. Safe opportunities to rape our women is not what they think is their objective. After Second Charon, they demanded reparations, production from Mercuric mines. They didn't care what Americans on Mercury had for guns while we were producing new hulls for them -- of course, we never gave them the hulls. Why the change?"

Three angry female voices cut Jacobsen off.

Through the commotion, Sandra heard the Hexagon Lord's whisper. "Learn your opponent's victory conditions. They matter." Sandra leaned back in her chair. Arthur Smith was entirely correct. Jacobsen was just being realistic. The Europeans would be delighted to have her body as a benefit of conquering America, but her body -- overlarge and overfirm by European standards -- was not going to be the *causus belli*.

"IOnEU is searching the logged world transmission records," announced Flora Barnes, her mind still on the cat-delegate. "It's a raw-record search. Ms. Tabbycat isn't found by any search pattern that we know. We had to improvise. it's a big search. That's why we couldn't help with Sandra's combat simulations -- our computing power is tied up."

"Gentlepersons!" Morbius's voice cut through the din. "Has anyone identified any other questions that we have not yet considered?" He waited patiently for an answer. "In that case, we shall disperse into smaller groups and consider more thoughtfully the issues we have identified thusfar." Paired lists of questions and names appeared on the display wall.

CHAPTER 5

THE PALAZZO MORBIUS
RUTLAND, MASSACHUSETTS
APRIL 20, 2174

Morning. Morbius and Fidelity Blake, draped in matching bathrobes, sat at their kitchen table, sipping at tea and toast. Their chairs were not quite so close as to bring discomfort to their guests, had any of them been awake.

Morbius spoke to his workpad. "The first two bi-transit torpedoes failed to return," he said. "The Isandhlwana was going to need eight hours to ready another cluster of them. Sandra, I believe this gives you the time needed for your hill climb. Perhaps you could take interested guests along? I gather Arthur Smith was agreeable."

"Will do, Sir," she answered. Morbius had long since quit trying to tell MinuteGirls and their mothers that he worked for a living, and was not and never had been 'sir'.

"Arthur Smith stayed at the establishment of Peter Gustafson -- the fellow Arthur will refer to as the

Supreme Collector. I believe they have a very-long running board game in which they wait for visits to display turns. In any event you, Charles, and Barbara have an invitation to visit. Take it! The House of Lost Dreams is truly unique. Peter, Arthur and their friend -- Blank Icon on last night's chat -- will want to climb. Despite his corrupting influence, listen carefully to anything Blank Icon says."

"What is this climb, anyhow," asked Fidelity. "A race?"

"Mount Monadnock. From the Lake. Under 90 minutes each way," answered Sandra. She sensed a doubt. "Sir, that is in power armor, power off."

"Very good," answered Morbius. "Nothing like a bodyweight-plus of pack to give the cardiovascular system a little boost. See you by dinner time. Oh, Sandra, please don't walk them into the ground." He broke the connection.

"Was she serious?" asked Fidelity.

"Oh, yes," answered Morbius. "The last decade or two of interns have all been fitness fanatics -- as well as everything else. One wonders what the Europeans would think of them -- we'll likely never find out, fortunately."

THE HOUSE OF LOST DREAMS PAXTON, MASSACHUSETTS APRIL 20, 2174

Morbius was right, decided Sandra. Gustafson's home up to its reputation. Gargoyles, buttresses, hung gutters, towers, three-century-old furniture, more games and paper books than she'd ever seen in one place -- and masked defenses in enormous depth. Did the house retreat underground? Or were there armored moon-shutters to englobe the building? The AI in her suit translated the words over the door -- "He who dies with the most toys, wins." [Translated from the language of the ancient Romans.] It sounded like a really strange set of victory conditions.

The Lord of the Hexagon wore almost-spring-cameo-flage color climbing clothes, the hexagons of his name being limited to dappled shading and hexagonal dark-brown buttons. He looked fresh in the morning, but Gustafson was obviously tired. The house was warm. He remained wrapped in a heavy housecoat. Was he well? There was no polite way to ask. Surely house medtronics would have intervened.

"You would be welcome to come along," Sandra added.

"Indeed I shall," he answered, "though my health requires that I use a flying chair. I could walk it, but in a time so long that you would become bored. Our final guest will be here momentarily."

"Final guest?" asked Sandra.

"The blank icon on your conference screen last night. Though Brian Copperwright is not really

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anonymous. It's just he views personal computers as 'a recent passing fad'. I don't think he *has* a personal icon, let alone a nickname. But listen carefully if he tells you something. His insight is sometimes uncanny."

"Which is why we're going along. To listen. And protect you from him," added the Hexagon Lord. Sandra almost became annoyed. After all, she was in power armor, and did have a power pack on standby. The Hexagon Lord's stifled grin gave him away. "Is he one of these MinuteBoys who thinks he's the Goddess's horizontal gift to womankind?" she asked innocently.

"No, no, not those morals," Gustafson pretended acerbity, not too well. "Political morals. Very dangerous. Brian Copperwright insists on getting history right."

These was a knock at the door. Gustafson's visitor was a short, cheery man seemingly of middle age. "Peter! Ar-thur!" They shook hands. "Sandra Miller, I presume?" Copperwright bowed politely. "I assume that you two have been warning her about me?" he asked.

"That did appear indicated," answered Gustafson.

"Obviously highly strategic," added the Hexagon Lord.

"Don't mind them," Brian told Sandra. "Among young people like the five of you, I am always on the best of behavior. Aren't I, Arthur?"

"You? Behave?" challenged the Hexagon Lord.

"All human activity is behavior," noted Brian. "Some better than others. But you can understand most of it...well, someone of normal intelligence can understand most of it, so ... oops, guess that argument doesn't apply here."

"In any event," announced Gustafson, "our other guests are here, and we had better let the old codger brigade," he gestured at Copperwright, "start for the door."

"Get us off the ground this week, that would," said the Hexagon Lord. Copperwright rolled his eyes. Sandra let the others precede her. "Us young people?" she asked Gustafson.

"Dear, I am almost sixty years older than Captain Zero," he explained. "The three of us have been doing this climb for decades. And it's a standing joke, whenever Charles and Barbara appear, that I am here to corrupt young people's morals." Her face was someplace between amusement and hardness. "No, not those morals. Sometime, ask me about the European Incursion."

Sandra was down the stairs before she finished her mental arithmetic. He was how old? Was that even possible?

MOUNT MONADNOCK STATE PARK
NEW HAMPSHIRE
APRIL 20, 2174

Charles eased the airvan into a parking space. Thirty

feet and twenty tons of steel and armorglass settled to earth with scarcely a sound. The flight up had been relatively quiet. He and Barbara had shared the view. Gustafson, Smith, and Copperwright had exchanged jabs and discussed the genius of the American political system, generally in terms reserved to describe the doddering of the senile. Only when they came to President Schuykill did they become serious. Schuykill had spent the previous Fall dodging accusations that his reorganization of the Civil Service 'preparing for another incursion' had crossed the line, and was in fact a plan to re-establish a standing army. Most Americans had finally given him the benefit of the doubt. Copperwright clearly had not. Sandra Miller listened quietly, guaging where she might enter the conversation.

The hatches opened. "You haven't said much yet," said Copperwright to Sandra. "Cat got your tongue?"

Sandra tried to remember the antique proverb involved. Nothing came to mind. "You were talking. But you told me what to ask."

"Only if you want me to corrupt you," said Copperwright. "You might regret your request." He grinned.

"Have to be careful of him," said Smith.

"He's a real troublemaker," added Gustafson, "Out to corrupt young people like you three." His gesture included Charles and Barbara.

Sandra looked to Captain Zero and Kapitan Mors for advice. Barbara rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Boys!" she said.

"The very best," said Smith.

"The EU tried to corrupt Margaret Barlow," said Sandra, her tone not quite joking. "You think you can do better?" Barlow was a founding saint of the MinuteGirls. Captured, she had been systematically tortured, drugged, and raped, but had not changed sides. Her detailed account of her incarceration was memorized by schoolgirls across the United States.

Copperwright looked Sandra straight in the eyes. "You know, before the incursion she was the little girl who lived, quite literally, down the lane from me. But since we have this gentle walk ahead of us, let's consider politics. And the events we heard last night." He waved the others along the path, joining Sandra at the back of the formation. "Are all the voicecoms linked?" he checked. Short-range millimeter-wave communication via throat and ear mikes was surely less strenuous than shouting back and forth.

"I'll give you a subversive question -- don't answer now! Pray tell, why did the Europeans launch the Incursion? What did they tell themselves they were doing? That's not 'what did they do?' It's 'what did they set out to do?'" asked Copperwright. Sandra spoke a few notes to her AI. The suit was depowered, but the servile fractional-AI was still up. She'd have to research that. If he was asking, the motives

must originally have been different. Or he was having fun with her.

"Perhaps," noted Charles, "The EU is not changing its mind about that. Whatever it was then, history is still true tomorrow. Let's consider the recent events for a bit?"

"Amateurs talk tactics. Generals talk logistics. Leaders talk national support base." Gustafson quoted an ancient aphorism. "What is the EU support base? We catch hints in entertainment broadcasts. If they're not faked."

"I watched some of those," admitted Sandra. "Morbius wanted someone unbiased to match data against an IOnEU report. It was -- even in the EU, a surgical programmer should be well paid, especially when he's a national expert. And it was a home comedy. The family looked poor. And a spacefleet captain -- EU SF, five centuries in the future. His home? He looked poor."

"Your observation is systematically correct," noted the Hexagon Lord. "In many games, you must guess the other guy's economics. Clues are obscure. EUWatch and ISeeEU do this a lot. Nonetheless: Just as here, money in Europe buys about what it did before the incursion. We think. Inflation/deflation cancel, long term. They get 1-2% economic growth a year -- lots of pieces all match that. B-teams trying to show more can't make pieces fit."

"But we have 6%," notes Barbara. "And GNP last year was what? Pushing 30 quadrillion dollars, meaning close to \$50 million per head. They're not in the same league, then, are they?"

"Not close," the Hexagon Lord agreed.

"Though some of that's illusion," noted Copperwright. "When I was a boy, a suitcase was a plastic box with hinges and a handle. You had to pack it yourself for a trip. That took an evening. I had friends with checklists. Modern days, your travelling cases are like old-style steamer trunks" ... he noted the bafflement of his companions --- "much bigger than old suitcases, motorized, and if you announce a trip you've done before, your servots and serviles do all the packing and shipping. You arrive, your bags are unpacked and waiting for you. When I was a boy, R18 insulation -- wood wall stuffed with foam -- was a big deal. A Federal Modern house has its berm and reactive armor and automatic defenses. But it's still a house, and sometime last century people noticed that after the first 20 or 30 thousand square feet a person, servots or no, a bigger house wasn't always better, just bigger."

"But if you want more house, mobilizing capital is really easy," said Charles. "The last time I ever heard of capital expense being a big factor was when we started building Pontefract Tube transports."

"Indeed," said Gustafson. "Not at all like the Variant rules for Star Empire IX."

"Why transports?" asked Sandra.

"They're big," said Barbara. "I got a tour of one of

the early ones. Each half was close to billion tons displacement."

"This leads me to my next corrupting question," announced Copperwright. "Sandra, the first sim you ran last night. Who won? Us or Europe?"

"We did," she answered casually. This had to be a trick question. Or was he just asking simple questions, to see if he could confuse her. "EU lost most of its insystem fleet. We had moderate losses. They wrecked up parts of Mercury; we traded planets. But they couldn't hold theirs, not when we have the fleet in being."

"Sounds right," said Gustafson. "Didn't get chance to look at details."

"Really?" asked the Hexagon Lord. "Are you sure we won?"

"They lost all their deGaulle's and Villars' classes, and 80% of every smaller class of warship. And all their orbital stuff. And the Raspberry Risers," Sandra answered, referring at the last to the 30,000 mile tall columns the EU used for orbital insertions.

"However, we managed to lose several transport ships -- the unlabeled icons near Mercury," noted Copperwright. Sandra's eyebrows wrinkled slightly. He

had looked carefully at the sim. "To be precise, the AI running the sim -- I'm not faulting you, you hardly had time even to run plays of Incursion VII, using fleet inputs from the EU ultimatum -- managed to lose all three sets of Pontefract transports currently in system. And we had to detonate the Mercury-North Pontefract terminal before the EU over-ran it."

"Those transports are expensive, aren't they?" asked Sandra.

"That's like saying the Butcher of Lowell was not a merciful woman," said the Hexagon Lord. "If I hear Copperwright aright, we lost our facility we have for generating new Tubes. We lost our ability to move tubes -- which we can't build anymore -- into position. And we lost the direct tube links between Mercury -- which holds most of our heavy industry -- and the rest of the solar system -- which holds most of our femtocircuit plants."

Sandra held up a hand, asking for time to think. Pontefract tubes -- hyperspace links connecting remote places -- were the basis of modern American interplanetary transport. Tubes were built on Mercury, using gravitronic generators so expensive that only one set of them was generally in working order. Then the tube ends were loaded on a matched pair of tube transports and stretched into position, the ends finally being buried. With care, tubes could be stretched to a length of eight or nine light years before they popped and vanished. Depending on the

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tube owners, transport through the tubes might be by banked rail lines or wet-water freighter. Rail cars or freighters rolled ahead into a tube, as though entering a tunnel, and reappeared elsewhere with no internal delay. Even casual measurement showed the transportation was not actually instantaneous. Clocks on the rail cars showed no delay, but the cars might take minutes or days to reappear on the far side.

"But most Pontefract lines go through Mercury," said Sandra. "If you lose the lines..."

"Precisely," said Copperwright.

"I think she's got it," added the Hexagon Lord.

"Puts her ahead of you," snapped Gustafson.

"Don't worry, you'll get it too. Possibly even in this millenium."

"For you to get it, 'millenium' is optimism," the Hexagon Lord countered.

"I have to go back and check," said Sandra. "You're saying the interplanetary transport lines mostly got wrecked? Except for freighters? But we...oh, I see. If we're chopped up like that, it gets hard to rebuild the Pontefract system."

"Not to mention," added Charles, "if we lose 98% of our interplanetary freight transport, which is mostly through Mercury North, the economy tanks, GNP crashes, and it gets really really expensive to rebuild."

"Not to mention," added Barbara, "a human factor. Eventually, the EU gets suspicious. If our economy tanks, the EU may start to wonder why it tanked. They don't know about Pontefract tubes, and won't understand why fairly small damage to planets that we mostly don't use should have wrecked our economy."

"I remember when North America was laced with roads," said Coppersmith. "That's surface roads. Now almost everything is deep underground, out of our thoughts, and out of EU satellite recon checks. They can't easily tell where the Pontefract junctions are in North America. They can't easily tell we have a depression."

"Mercury is a bit different," said Barbara.

"Perhaps the EU got lucky, blundering into Mercury-North?" asked the Hexagon Lord. Gustafson nodded.

Sandra smiled. For once she could add something to the conversation. "Pontefract junctions. They're way up the Incursion VII opforce servile's priority target list, because losing them makes it hard to shift reserves."

"Oh, right," Gustafson corrected himself.

"Barbara," said Charles, "I believe Miss Miller here has just won herself a tray of Peter's chocolate fudge, hasn't she? That is one of your expert games, isn't it, Peter?"

"Indeed." Gustafson's sigh was not quite sincere. "That is, young lady, Incursion VII is one of the games in which I am the world's expert -- and you pointed out something I should have remembered. So -- the five of

us view it as an in-group reference -- you are about to receive a pound of hand-cooked chocolate fudge."

"Four," said Barbara. "Men and candy." She shook her head.

"You know," said Sandra, "It's actually not right. I-7 optimizes so the EU does as well as they can, like taking out Pontefract tubes. But that's the game rules. A real EU player doesn't know to target them. Damn! I'm going to have to reset the sim series when I get back, generate realistic EU objectives for the game-serviles to execute."

"You still found something like the worst-possible-case," said Copperwright. "That's good to know."

"However, I am quite sure that someone in the Solar Navy has estimated the EU objectives, best guess, in Incursion VII terms. I don't remember where those modules where pubbed -- History of Wargaming Quarterly should get it for you." said Gustafson.

"You can't instantly find everything in your collection?" The Hexagon Lord was obviously teasing Gustafson.

"Of course I can. However, she must search through the more limited archives of the Widener and the Library of Congress." Gustafson looked skyward.

"Go back?" asked Charles. "We were talking national support bases?" He let the party focus attention back on his remarks. "The EU didn't go through the aftermath of the Incursion. We had massive infrastructure loss, millions of dead -- the English plagues were a terror weapon, targeted, didn't kill that many people over there -- drastic political changes when the duopoly parties imploded, the NonIntercourse act; it took 20 years for GNP to recover. Still, at the turn of the millenium our economies were about even. Put in the changes since. What do you get? An EU economy one or two percent of ours, perhaps worth more, their technology being better. What sort of a balance is that?"

"We still need a ten-fold hullweight advantage," noted Barbara. "For morale, not just power. People remember First Charon." Sandra nodded agreement. At First Charon an America Solar Navy Task Force with three-fold hullweight advantage and overconfident commander had been crushed while inflicting limited losses.

"Taxes," noted Copperwright. "Taxes." He smiled at Sandra. "See, I said I'd try corrupting you. EU taxes -- guesstimate -- are half of GNP. President Schuykill, with a real war, won't get a five per cent capitation. We need ten times the money. They raise ten times the GNP fraction, on one percent of our GNP. The Solar Navy is a match, give or take, for the EU -- not counting the private efforts."

"But their tax rates -- that's why their economy is paralyzed," objected Sandra.

"Almost paralyzed," said Charles. "They have other worse problems, too, same as before the incursion."

"Taxes, fleet tonnages, GNP -- all cancels out. Assuming ten-to-one is still a good number. If not, we

have problems," said the Hexagon Lord. "Peter, it's like Imperial Stars XX -- the Riss get buried if they totally ignore technology development. We could be hit the same way."

"May I ask a dumb question?" asked Sandra. "It's really a Grant question, but for him it would be smart, him knowing all the background?"

"There are no dumb questions," said Barbara. Clueless, perhaps, but not dumb."

"Grant does 20th century military history. Weapons, tactics, games, miniatures - though he left his US Navy of World War 2, 1:600 scale, complete through LCTs, at home. Late 20th century, America was magically ahead of everyone else. Invisible aircraft, communications, rocket weapons,... What happened?"

"That is not a dumb question," said Barbara. "It's a human factors question -- something not for you to answer, Charles." Charles nodded politely. Sandra swallowed. Did the most famous married couple in America have domestic spats?

"That's your question, Peter. Or we could wait until we get back, and ask Fidelity Blake," Charles answered nonetheless.

"That sweet little girl?" answered Gustafson. "You want her opinion on something political that happened before she was born? No. My answer..."

"It goes back to the incursion. Before the Incursion, American science was university based, supported by the government -- yes, the Federal government. See, now I am being a corrupting influence. Engineering was company based. But already, without the EU barbarians raising a finger, there were troubles. The final list goes: Free Universities, incursion, immigration, boys, money."

"Free Universities? A problem?" asked a surprised Charles.

"Boys?" Sandra was almost shocked. MinuteBoys were a pain, even when their thoughts were not on the horizontal, but wrecking the Solar Navy?

"One at a time, please," said Gustafson. "Just as well Miss Professor Blake is absent. Go back before the incursion. American universities were more and more under the thumb of all their staffs. Anti-intellectuals. People who couldn't make it as scholars. The administrators worked hard to get rid of the faculty, replacing them with electronic gadgets and cheap hired help. But they forgot why universities exist. That's how we got the Free Universities: faculty who got rid of their administrators.

"Why universities? You work at one, you have people to talk to. You have a pipeline full of students. Above all, you have a library. Along came administrators, more and more of them. The Faculty part of the budget fell. Then along came computers, and the Library of Congress box. Suddenly, a historian didn't need a big school library. He needed this box under his desk, and an expense account. And someone figured this out, and launched a new university: administrator-free. Owned by Faculty. Rented classrooms. Students who handle their own fun and games. Oh, under a fifth the tuition of

the competition. That's the Free University of Deerfield, and imitators.

"Except for one detail. That transition was lots rougher in the sciences. You need lab space, technicians,...and people were much poorer then. Incomes were a thousand-fold lower. Servots were special instruments and rare. Engineering schools stayed in the old model, getting into worse and worse shape.

"Then we had the incursion. Disruption, death, devastation. The Liberty and Constitution Parties replaced the Democratic Republicans. Both opposed government spending on science. So it didn't. Worse, the NonIntercourse Acts meant that immigration stopped dead. Grad schools had long been filled with foreigners, because Americans had always been anti-intellectual. Boys were brought up that way. Of course, back then most scientists were men, believe it or not. So the pool of new scientists -- except biologists, they were women -- mostly dried up.

"Fortunately, telomerase stimulators came along. Just in time. So some American scientists stayed around, rather than dying of old age. Until science restarted. Without old codgers like me -- I was teaching labs for a hundred years -- we would have been like Plato's Academy. Instead of doing science, we would have done literary criticism, because you need to be taught how to do science by someone with a clue, but any idiot who knows nothing is a brilliant literary critic. Oh, money. Until we got rich, rich enough that wealthy amateurs could do good science on their own money, science stopped dead. So the EU got its technical lead."

"And he calls me subversive," grumbled Copperwright to no one in particular. He smiled at Sandra. "There is also a long version of the same answer. Book length, in fact. Says the same thing, though."

"Thank you!" blurted Sandra. That was not at all what she expected to hear.

"May we return to our other considerations?" asked Charles. "Someone might remind the Navy about Pontefract tubes? Just in case? Thinking about civilian economies, after all, is not something the military does any more. I gather national support base is something we've said before, with some vulnerabilities?" There had to be some way to keep the three old men focused on the task at hand. At least they were only using the games as examples, not arguing details of fictional campaigns they'd fought over the game table.

"Go back to EU," said the Hexagon Lord. "What are their victory conditions? What do they want? Other than our two young ladies, of course."

"Suppose they did the same financial analysis," asked Copperwright. "They'd see they were even, wouldn't they? And under no pressure to act? But they spoke of a mutual threat. What? Oversize na-

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tional debts? Outbreaks of libertarian thinking in their children?"

"Wait! It's not even," said Sandra. "It only looks even. We're holding even with them in the hullweight ratio, staying at 10:1. They can't raise their taxes a lot, can they? But they grow 2% a year. We grow 6% a year. Very soon, they fall a lot behind."

"Can they have a conversation? Do they see their situation?" asked Barbara. "They use surface roads, star-freighters, uncoded entertainment broadcasts. We don't, mostly."

"You can see houses from orbit," Charles observed.

"House outsides are constant," noted Gustafson. "Federal Modern looks the same as a hundred years ago. The change is the armor plate, the defenses, the number of subbasement levels. You can't see those from orbit. And houses under construction are tented -- convenience. But it blocks spy satellites."

"Barbara raises an interesting issue," said the Hexagon Lord. "Suppose they work out what Sandra proposed, that being more understanding than you two will ever get." He gestured at his two friends. "In any game like Territories, at some point you realize you must fight now -- or be so far behind you can't win. They are almost into that trap."

"But do they believe it?" asked Barbara. "That's a human issue, not economics or tactics. They can believe, even if they are way ahead of us."

"I consult for game designers," noted Gustafson. "I plow through more intelligence corporation reports than you can shake a stick at, all to make games more real."

"Eee!" grumbled the Hexagon Lord. "Historical realism is a tool of Satan!" Sandra looked carefully at Miller's two friends. From their faces, this was a very old argument, not quite taken seriously.

"Yes, but they pay me well, and it funds the House of Lost Dreams." Gustafson paused. "In any event, I have read these. The EU knows they are way ahead. They have no doubt. National support base is not stylish. Style is weapons and ships and leaders."

"It didn't used to be that way," said Charles. "The Popular Army worried about national support bases."

"You did," agreed Copperwright. "And you were right. But that's you. Most people would rather not think about the topic. The intelligence corporations get half of their money from game companies, another third from entertainment producers -- Star Commando Jill may be silly, but her enemies are as accurate as money can buy."

"A people issue," announced Barbara. "We got rid of government spy agencies, Goddess be thanked, and incidentally got rid of analysts who care about national support bases. Now we don't have them."

"Don't have many," corrected Sandra. "There's Spy-Texas."

"Who?" asked Barbara. "Tell me later, I want to know."

"So what are the EU victory conditions?" repeated the Hexagon Lord. Experience told him that three or five repetitions would probably be enough to get people on topic.

"Do they know they're playing?" challenged Gustafson. "They think we're irrelevant, like Mongolia, Mozambique, and Manchuria. They don't attack us because they think we're a joke -- those jokes are dime a dozen on EU entertainment broadcasts."

"Sandra and her friends mean we're a very expensive joke if they invade," said Copperwright, "as they learned at Jacksonville and Vladivostok." He smiled at her.

"We have now demonstrated that the EU Victory Conditions are not 'invade America and rape women,'" observed the Hexagon Lord sardonically. "Is this supposed to be a surprise to someone?" Sandra wished she could see faces, but they were on the trail ahead of her. Had they all set this up with Morbius, just for her benefit?

"OK!" said Barbara. "The EU. Alpha Centauri and the EU Ultimatum. Conditions we can identify. Conditions we can't, like that cat being an extreme biomorph project or from another planet. No Conditions --- bureaucratic bumbling. Which?"

"Nothing like narrowing options," said Charles quietly.

"EU regularly proposes terms for regularizing relations," said Gustafson. "Sometimes I need them for sims with diplomatic segs. Of course, their terms never change, and we never agree. Except, except their most recent terms were totally different."

"Different how?" asked Charles. "Hadn't been watching hard. These days I mostly watch my Mercury manufacturing firm."

"EU wants us to be like Greater Europe," said Gustafson. "They always wanted us to take their model: High taxes. Social contract. No industrial competition. Womb to grave socialism. No Bill of Rights for social-reactionary dissenters. They never demanded territory. They never demanded we disarm citizens. This time, they wanted territory and disarmament, but left other customs in place."

"They know what happens if someone tries," interjected Sandra heatedly.

"Actually," said Copperwright, "they probably don't. Know, I mean. They didn't get it during the Incursion, starting with that Nazi General who read there were 600,000 long-range sharpshooting rifles in private hands, and crossed out three zeros to perfect the report. Entertainment broadcasts -- their American jokes don't attack the fundamental freedom, they ignore it. They're blind on the topic."

"Now they want territory. Lots of it," said Gustafson. "Are they resource-poor? Hard to believe at 2% of our GNP. Is there something special

about our planets? 50% rare-earth mineral beds? Plutonium boulders?" Sandra noted who had to stifle a giggle. The physically-impossible plutonium boulder was a staple of Star Commando Jill and three dozen holodrama imitations, but you only knew that if you watched such things.

"Why new victory conditions?" asked Charles. "There's no sign they're under internal strain. They've got better technology, and one percent or so of our GNP -- that's not a materials shortage. Their politics are as half-free as ever. They still shut down dissident TV stations and boycott Liberal political parties. They did that in the 90's in Kosovo and Austria. With American help!"

"Their politicians -- what we hear of them -- are very ordinary. No charismatic nutcakes in sight," observed Barbara.

"Incursion VI, Advanced Game, includes all foreign powers," said Gustafson. "I helped with the design. No foreign nation, not even Taiping or Szechuan, is significant relative to the EU. The foreigners stay free through unity, but it's a totally defensive posture."

Chapter 5

SUPREME HEADQUARTERS,
STARFLEET EUROPA
PARIS, FRANCE, EUROPEAN UNION
APRIL 20, 2174, 0915 EU Time.

"Good morning, my Admiral," Fleet Captain Villiers stiffened her back, setting short-cut amber hair waving. She was tied behind her desk by electrooptical interlinks, but military courtesy specified the alternative.

"Another late evening?"

"Good morning, Genevieve." Fleet Admiral Rohan answered. "Indeed. I had a prolonged and rational discussion with the commander of the English Marines. She was remarkably persuasive."

"Persuasive?" said Captain Villiers. "In the meantime, there is a staff report at 10:30. Admiral Tren'rendon and his staff have set up quarters and facilities, and are to meet with you at 11. Oh, and the President wishes to talk to you after you have spoken with Tres'rendon. Apparently our good friends are making another visit to Alpha Centauri."

"Tren'rendon, at 11?"

"I knew Marshal Smith could be very persuasive, and you might be slightly delayed this morning. Yes?"

"Did our friends mention what they were visiting Alpha Centauri with? Not that we object, this being their lawful territory?"

"A reinforced fleet, I gather. The data awaits you in your office, along with your morning coffee and croissants," answered Villiers.

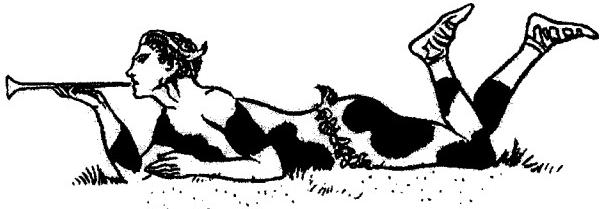
"Ah, well. Another day more for the Union. Another day closer to the final solution the the American Challenge."

...That's it.

THE SWASHBUCKLING MAGE RIDES AGAIN #10

*"When Muses talk we listen...
even at 3 AM on a Tuesday."*

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P ersonal Notes:

Life continues to be busy, as I write I'm waiting for contractors to arrive to put a new roof on our condo building. The folks who did repairs on it last year in an attempt to fix a leak did more damage than they did anything to help, and we ended up having to have the whole thing replaced at a cost of about \$7500.

This is putting a bit of a crimp on our spending money for the months to come, and will reduce our ability to purchase new reading material and gaming items. Of course, I do have some backlog, and IR is now reaching more game publishers who hopefully will send along promotional copies of some of their games so that I can continue to do reviews (and of course pass along some of the review materials to other folks who write for IR regularly too).

We've added a second gaming night to our weekly schedule, so we have gaming going on at our place on Sunday afternoons and now Wednesday evenings. The new group filled up officially in just a couple of weeks, and hopefully we'll be able to keep this a regular feature (and a bit of a stress reliever for me, which evidently was the main cause of my health problems in the past few months).

Beltane was a quiet personal holiday for our household, and gave Kiralee and I some much needed personal time. Unfortunately she's about to hit the increased workload in a big way at work. Next issue I'll probably be handling all the IR editor duties, and Kiralee may have to skip having a zine for the issue.

I nterregnum Notes:

Interregnum Back Issues are now being distributed in various places around the area as we seek to expand our visibility, thanks to the efforts of Pete Maranci to get all the material to us as he makes his move out of Massachusetts.

The first IR sampler CD has been requested from the net and shipped out (though in this case to someone who wanted it for research purposes for a college paper on roleplaying culture), and hopefully more will be en route by the time you read this.

Interregnum is now available for purchase on the magazine rack at Pandemonium Books & Games Inc., 36 JFK St. (2nd Floor of the "Garage") in Harvard Square Cambridge. This is an experiment for us to gain exposure, but it's at a break-even price for us (\$4.95) basically the same cost as mailing most subscription issues.

IR is now being delivered to more game companies and publishers associated with gaming each issue so that more of them will know that we are out here, and what the writers think of their products in reviews and articles.

By encouraging this sort of feedback with the companies its hoped that we will all benefit in the long term in regards to product quality and fan involvement in the results.

I would like to encourage folks here to also write more material oriented towards specific game systems and settings. IR under Pete used to cover quite a few companies regularly in regards to articles, scenarios, etc. Recently we've been slightly off track in this direction. Although material not specific to a mechanic can be valuable, it would be good for us to print more material of both general and specific interest.

I also want to improve the look of IR. One of the big things that set us apart for many of the other small press zine publishers is the quality of our layout. I'd like more folks to either include more artwork and leave less white space in their zines, or to get permission from them (when dealing with electronic master copies) to add in artwork and layout "tweaks" to improve things. Let me know if you're willing to let me in my guise as the "Art Director" of IR to do this.

We also need more artists, especially in regards to quality cover art, and perhaps some cartoon material (like Rich Staats used to do in months past). I've done what I can for recruiting artwork, but we certainly need more.

We also need more writers - attrition is taking its toll. Without writers IR is doomed.



Topic Article : Favorite House Rules

Its been a while since I regularly ran someone else's rule system. I tend to get very frustrated with the mistakes, design concepts, and style clashes that many commercial game systems have had with me over the years, as well as the extreme limiting nature of their character creation systems.

Still, some systems have worked reasonably well to enhance a few of these games to make them playable by me and the folks I game with. The last time I Gmed someone else's rules was a *Champions* (Hero System) game that lasted about a year. Some of the changes I made to the rules that we found useful are what follows:

Unlimited Disadvantages: Generally my standing rule was to build characters on a maximum of 200 points in a 4-color superhero game, not counting disadvantages. There was no limit to how many disadvantage points you could take to balance the taking of extra advantage points that didn't count in the total.

This meant that often characters were more in the actual 300 to 350 point range in potential, but with a 100 to 150 point total number of disadvantages the characters were more vulnerable and more detailed in regards to their non-super life in general.

Knockback: The knockback rules were originally designed for use with miniatures. We didn't use such, and so I felt knockback and all advantages and disadvantages dealing with such were unnecessary and best eliminated from use in the game. This also helped speed up combat.

VPP: The variable Power Pool was a feature of character power structure construction that often turned out to be a headache from a GMs point of view. So it was simply not allowed.

Editorial Control: My hard rule to enforce, but one that helped drastically when I could get the players to accept it, was that all characters had to face my editorial control to ensure that their points balanced (we had several players whose ability to get math right, even with spreadsheets and other devices to help, was abysmal - either from taking not enough time on character creation, or from deliberately trying to cheat).

The Editorial control also prevented too many ridiculous unplayable characters as I had seen in the past from champions (like the alien character with absolute life support that had a damage shield that disintegrated all matter that came into contact with it.... including the ground he walked on!)

It also helped prevent folks from stepping on each other's "niches" within the group. No parties of all bricks or all martial artists or all flying energy blasters etc.

Beyond these basics there were a number of additional advantages that we added to the game to make certain character concepts that they didn't actually have in the game system but which made perfect sense to us. A sample of a few of these are:

Chameleon : This power is similar to but different from invisibility. It allows the character to blend into the background to avoid detection. Normally its bought against Normal Sight, but it can also be bought to hide from other visual senses, sonar and radar. Base Power Cost 15 points, each additional sense costs an additional +5. An unmoving character using this ability while against a wall or other surface is -10 to all Perception rolls to be seen.



A Moving character against such a background is -5 to all Perception rolls to see them. If senses are used to perceive them that are not bought on the power then there is no modifications to the Perception rolls at all. In combat a Chameleoned Character fighting a character without a special sense, but who makes a successful perception roll against them is only at $\frac{1}{2}$ their normal OCV to attack the chameleon. Normal END costs to use Chameleon are applied.

Agelessness : A character with this trait is unaffected by natural or unnatural aging effects. Their physical age is frozen, and they can conceivably live forever barring accident, violence, disease or the sun going nova. Cost 5 points. No END costs (Life Support Always on variant).

Desolid (Fixed): Desolid does not allow the character to breathe while desolid unless they have Life support to need not to breathe (separate or linked to Desolid). Being Desolid and not breathing for 10 turns or more causes 1d6 Stun per Phase NND until unconscious/dead.

Astral Projection is a form of Desolid where the physical body is left behind and breathing. Since the body can be harmed while absent etc this is a -1 Disadvantage on Desolid.

Not being able to pass thru physical objects (like walls in a mist form) is a -1/2 limitation on Desolid. Affected by a particular energy form damage/stun while Desolid is a -1/4 (electricity for example). To Be affected by all PD or all ED attacks while Desolid is a -1 Limit.

To be able to appear solid to people that are not desolid is a +10 point cost addition to the power (great for getting silly heroes to tackle you while standing in front of a brick wall).

Extra Life: A character with this trait will revive to life after death to full stats. Points spent on this ability are lost after revival. Extra Lives are rolled on an activation of 11 or less for each bought and not yet used. (Multiple attempts can be made to revive, but each one used is then removed from the character until revived or out of extra lives). Cost is 10 points each. Character must have a good reason for this ability, and at least one means of death that they cannot be revived from (ex: Beheading). Power cannot be placed in an EC or Multipower Pool.

Flight (Fix): Flight with a 0 Strength Carrying Capacity is a -1/2 Limitation on the power.

Teleportation (Fix): Memorized locales can be bought for 1 point, a character with memorized locales as part of their power can reach the memorized locale without applying distance limits and END costs for distance. They must be in same dimension or have the Extradimensional Usable advantage (+ $\frac{1}{2}$ to entire power). Memorization of a locale takes 1 Turn.

Time Sight: Allows user to see events in an area (LOS radius) with their own normal Sight, that which occurred in the recent past. This is a special Detect. Cost is 10 points per D6. When rolled for, 1 hour back into the past per pip rolled on the die is possible. +1/4 advantage is to allow others to see ghost images of the events being observed with the power. +1/2 advantage to use all senses, not just sight.

A Few Useful Power Advantages:

Personal Immunity: This is an advantage to any power. Character is immune to the affects of their own power. Useful if encountering Power Reflection, Missile Deflections, Area effects, etc. +1/4 advantage on the power.

Time Delay: This is an advantage on a power. It allows the user to set a power's effects to activate a certain time in the future. This is used to create a timed explosive in the system etc. + 1/4 advantage.

And A Few Power Limitations:

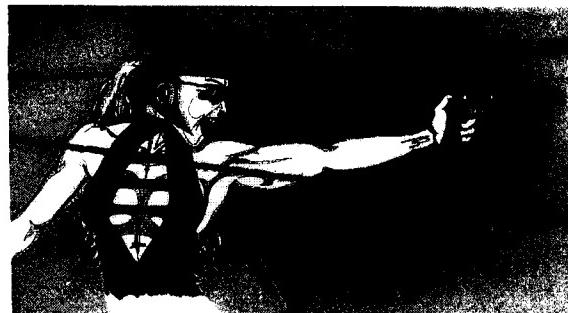
Fluctuating Power Levels: This is for a power that is finicky and fades in and out. Whenever the power is used a roll is made on 1d6 to see how much active power the power has. This cannot be taken on a power that has Burnout or Activation rolls already. If the power is not an instant one (ex: Flight) then the resulting roll is in effect until the first phase of the character on the Next Turn, when it is rolled again. If this is not enough power for it to work at all, then the power is non-functional for the present time. Fluctuating can also be used to simulate makeshift equipment. One of the following two roll tables are used (chosen at power creation):

Table One (-1 Limitation) Fluctuating

1-2	25% of Maximum Active Power
3-4	50% of Maximum Active Power
5-6	100% of Maximum Active Power

Table Two (-1 ½ Limitation) Fluctuating

1-2	No Active Power
3-4	50% of Active Power
5-6	100% of Max. Active Power



Some Variants on Dealing With the Foci Limitation:

-1 Limit : Immobile Focus (Ex: A Temple)

- ½ Limit : Large Focus (Carried on a Truck)

+¼ Advantage : Conceal Focus is a focus that appears ordinary when not in use. This could be a suit made of a new bullet proof cloth, a cigarette lighter that is actually a laser weapon or a watch that is a two way television set. A favorite foci advantage for James Bond etc.

+½ Advantage : Easily Replaceable Foci. If it is lost it can be replaced by the character without too much effort. This could be a baseball bat, an ordinary gun, etc.

Expendable Focus : Is a foci that must be replaced after each use, such as an herb, spell, plutonium, chemicals etc. If it is dangerous, or takes a long time to replace then the value of the limitation increases (ranges from -¼ to -1).

I hope that all the above may be of value to any Champions players who are reading this issue of Interregnum. They served us well in their day, but I just don't run superhero games these days (there's only so much time to run games in one's week.... and my plates full right now).

Comments On IR #38:

(As usual, if I fail to comment it does not reflect on the value or importance of your writing, only that I had nothing specific to say. I do read and enjoy everyone's zines.)

Words On The Wing: re: Call to Power. Another point to note is that the online multi-player version of the game appears to be buggy, as I was not able to get it to actually connect to any of the 3 servers that the games are run on. Its possible that this may be a modem speed related problem, but if so its not mentioned in the documentation at all. Also peace is difficult to maintain in the game, unless you keep giving things away to the other nations run by the computer. But this of course can easily result in the other nations surpassing you in technology and winning. The computer also has the annoying bug that no matter how big a world you use or how much land mass, it insists on placing other civilizations close to yours and hemming you in, so you never really get to use much of the map or explore much.

Sign of The Dancing Priestess: The important thing about my in depth characters that you mentioned (and Shawn's Sindar) was that all the character were capable of moving from campaign to campaign as they were not tied to their setting and could be mechanically translated at least to a few different systems. Unfortunately I apparently am one of the few gms we know who do such translations or allow such imported characters. If they did then it would be easier to develop such characters, and I personally would find it great to be able to play a few of the ones that I haven't been able to use as NPCs in recent games (and of course occasionally playing my favorites, like Max, would be grand).

Actually I don't know a whole lot of local GMs who actually have campaigns that last as long as mine do. Having perused the Boston gamers mailing list now for many months, not one single other gm on that list has had a game that appears to have lasted beyond one story line (and many of those have lasted but for 3-4 actual game sessions).

Long term campaigns require players who are devoted to the characters and setting, as well as a GM who is so devoted. I find myself with too many transient players and too many players who lack the vision needed in character depth to follow long term goals (which a long term campaign needs).

I'm hoping that you and Ben can keep his game world running, as the best incentive to long term games is to have a long term game already running. I burn out if I only GM and don't play, and then change campaigns as a cure for burnout. If I can play regularly I don't burn out (or burn out at a much slower speed).

I think we need to weed the gaming group a bit, and remove those players who cannot keep up with the schedule requirement or who have styles that don't really match our own. A move towards quality, in other words. Of course, six months ago we weren't even sure that Ben and Ian were going to be able to make games regularly because of job situations etc (and I consider them among the more stable players in the group in regards to schedules), so there is the risk we had back when I ran the Perilous Earth campaign that the loss of key quality players could still end the game prematurely.

Re: W.A.V.E. as you know now, this has been verified by several reliable web publications, making it a very scary reality.

A Fleet of Stars: I think we have a conflict of definitions on the concept of munchkin. You associate munchkinism with the ability to damage and how much, but I tend to connect it to large amounts of combat with a paper thin plot and little in the way of character development. Understand that I generally find the Hong Kong movie genre to have a munchkin style to them in to begin with. Its not that I'm anti-martial arts or opposed to depicting combat. Its that I look for depth in stories (and stories in stories).

Recently I got an interesting post from the rpg-create mailing list I am on, by Christopher Casey, a fan and regular GM of it, regarding Feng Shui. As he described it: "FS is a game of insane gonzo action. Any story you may toss at the players is essentially filler between set piece shootouts. Everything is fairly simple and melodramatic : There are Bad Guys Who Will Destroy The World™ out there. Go kill 'em. Character hooks are equally simple : Said Bad Guys™ also killed your little brother. Go kill 'em some more. If you can kill 'em in interesting ways or interesting placed, so much the better. And try to look good doing it too."

This seems to be true for everyone I've seen who has used the game in regards to playing style and how the game is used. Simple does not, to me, equate good. Perhaps you have been in an exceptional game, or perhaps there is a lot of material in the game that is regularly ignored by both players and gms that you are picking up on.

I also suspect that your statement that the hero doesn't necessarily triumph through force of arms/powers/goodness in the movies rarely actually is carried out in games of FS run by the majority of Gms. Is this even covered in the game book?

I tend to judge games not just by their books, but how they are commonly implemented. That's why I gave up certain games years ago - they had mindsets/styles associated with them that were too difficult to get people to break away from, no matter how hard I tried as GM to give them a wider scope.

I'm sure its possible for a GM to ignore the bad parts of the system, or to emphasize the plot instead of the combat in Feng Shui, but it doesn't appear to be the way most GMs running it do.



The Chrome Libram

©2000 By Dale Meier
Volume 1 Issue #3 June 2000

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IN THIS ISSUE:
New Wine, Old Bottles
The Dragon and the Cross Revisited
Commentary
Colophon

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New Wine, Old Bottles

Almost everyone has house rules. I have yet to see a gaming group go by a game's rules as they are published. One man's gem in a game system is another's flaw. Here are a few of my own house rules that I apply to a number of my games, both specifically and in general:

Corruption points: Similar to Dark Side Points in Star Wars or Villain Points in DC Universe, this is an idea I got from a friend on the CGG mailing list and I use it only with AD&D and Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay. When a character does something against their alignment, they receive corruption points. Certain point levels indicate the character's current alignment and measures their improvement or deterioration in alignment, such as going from Lawful Good to Lawful Neutral, etc. To return to their original alignment, a character must atone--perform a quest or certain duty or make reparations for their actions.

Like Dark Side and Villain points, there is a point of no return. Once the character hits Chaotic Evil in the AD&D alignment scale or Chaotic in the WFRP system, they are consumed by evil and become an NPC villain. Mages and clerics have it rougher in this system. A failed spellcasting attempt or unanswered prayer may require them to make a Wisdom check (or other appropriate check) to avoid resorting to evil.

Expanding D&D: Level limitations are one thing that always irked me in D&D and AD&D--demihumans had level limits and couldn't take on specific professions (e.g. a dwarf couldn't be a paladin in first edition AD&D). To eliminate that annoyance, I've ruled that the maximum level for any character is 36th level and a character of any race can take on any profession. Now, after decades, TSR is finally making this house rule official. Sheesh, it took 'em long enough.

I've also found the D&D rules for clerical and mage spells to be a bit unreal--then again, so do a lot of other players. The memorization system for mages just seemed too unrealistic--what good is a mage who's used up all his spells? The orcs behind that big iron door certainly won't wait for a mage to re-memorize a fireball spell. They'll be too busy hacking him and the rest of the heroes to bits.

To resolve the problem, I began looking for a point-based system and found TOME (Todd's Own Magic Enhancements) by Todd Poindexter. The system is simple. A character has a certain number of magic points based on their level and Constitution. Each spell has a point cost based on its difficulty level and the effect desired (if applicable). Once the spell is cast, the mage must make a fatigue save or suffer the consequences. There are also consequences for casting spells with insufficient spell points. In short, the limitations of how many spells a mage can know are still regulated by level as per the rules, but the need for re-memorization is eliminated.

I also found the divine magic system somewhat troublesome as it appeared to me that clerics and priests were milking their deities for spells. At the same time, characters reliant upon divine magic were running into the same problem--cast a spell, forget it, then pray to one's deity to learn it again. A fellow member on the CGG list voiced his own solution to the problem. Instead of posing limit restrictions on religious characters' spell-casting abilities, he ruled that paladins, clerics, et.al could pray for certain divine magic effects by allowing the players to choose the ability or prayer they wanted their character to invoke (within reason). The spell list was supplemented by a number of mage spells as well.

Magic in general posed a bit of a moral problem. As a Christian, I was taught to avoid things of the occult. A large discussion of the issue was held on the CGG list on several occasions and I took a number of ideas from that discussion and incorporated them into the campaign setting.

1) Magic is neither good nor evil; it is a natural force made by the Creator that no one seems to fully understand. Mages can manipulate this force by casting spells. By managing magic this way, mages are more like Gandalf in The Lord of the Rings or Coriakin in The Voyage of the Dawn Treader rather than being painted with a broad brush as sinners.

2) Spells are classified as being good, neutral or evil, based on the tables for Red, White and Black wizards in the first edition Dragonlance sourcebook. The same is true of clerical spells.

3) Druids are divine spellcasters who have been given a unique insight into the mechanism of Creation.

The cosmology of the planes in AD&D and D&D didn't quite set well with me. Being the owner of Deities & Demigods as well as the pocket digest version of The Manual of the Planes, I mashed the planes together to simplify things in my Shendaril campaign setting. The "Positive Planes" (e.g. the Seven Heavens, Nirvana, Valhalla, the Happy Hunting Grounds, Positive Material Plane, et.al) are now classified as "Heaven." The "Negative Planes" (e.g. Gehenna, the Hells, Hades, Negative Material Plane, et.al) are classified as "Hell." The energy, elemental and para-elemental planes are all parts of these two opposing planes as well. In addition, the astral and ethereal planes are combined together with these two planes.

In confronting the polytheistic religions of the demihumans and other races, I came up with a unique twist. The other deities are not demons in disguise, but are the immortal heroes and heroines of those races. Over the ages, the peoples of Shendaril have fallen away from worshiping the Creator and have lost or misinterpreted the stories and legends of their heroes, making them into gods and goddesses. Those deities worshiped by evil races, such as goblins, orcs, et.al, are demons, however.

Finally, I had to deal with the issue of summoning and controlling elementals. I was uncomfortable with the idea of a good wizard using his Creator-given talents to summon and control a spirit. Instead, another CGG list member suggested making the elementals constructs of magical power. These constructs, however, would be susceptible for demonic possession if the spellcaster was not careful. The original ruling stated that on the Prime Material Plane there was a 50 percent chance of a demon possessing the elemental. To compensate for elementals being created on other planes, I expanded the chances of demonic possession to being 75 percent on a negative plane and 25 percent on a positive plane.

I also kitbashed a character generation system between basic D&D and first edition AD&D. I prefer the variety presented by AD&D's separation of race and character class, but enjoy D&D's simplicity. To solve that problem, I narrowed down some of the special abilities of the AD&D-specific character classes to put them on the same level as D&D character classes, then separated the races and character classes.

Fudging: Yes, I admit it. I fudge. I can't stand to even think that my players aren't having a good time. In addition, I detest any kind of anti-climactic dice rolls that might occur. If a player makes a bad roll at a dramatically inopportune moment, I do one of several things: I either fudge on the task difficulty, let them fudge the roll (either by rerolling or applying some sort of Edge, Force, or Character Point) or simply ignore the roll altogether and let them succeed. The same goes for fights between NPCs. Why bother with dice rolls at that point--it's much easier and dramatically appropriate to have the NPC battle come out as GM sees fit.

The GM's library is the definitive word: This is a rule that every GM should lay down in order to prevent confusion and havoc. Invariably, a player will get a sourcebook that the GM doesn't have and try to weasel their way into getting a new character type, weapon or other tidbit into the game that the GM knows little or nothing about. This usually spells disaster for the campaign. I figure that if it's not in my sourcebooks, in a sourcebook that I don't have, or something I don't allow

to exist in my gameworld, it isn't getting in--no way, no how.

The highest/most successful roll wins: I first came across this "fast draw" initiative rule in the first edition of Star Wars: The RPG and it has stuck with me ever since. Pendragon uses the same idea for initiative and it works quite well. For the most part, I use this in almost all of my SF and fantasy games with the exception being D&D--for nostalgic reasons, of course. This rule simply states that in an opposed contest, whoever has the best roll--whether in the number of "successes," the degree of success, or flat out succeeding a roll--wins. In the case of a tie, the PC wins. To me, this rule is very realistic as it gives the player-characters with lower Dexterity scores a chance to outdraw, outmaneuver and outrun characters with higher Dexterity scores. At the same time, it provides more uncertainty to the actions of more dexterous characters.

"Reality rules": These are some common sense rules I apply to Battletech in order to eliminate some of the more "impossible" abilities of battlemechs and vehicles in the game. For the most part, these rules apply more toward missiles and missile launchers. The basis for these rules is the Omega Rules, which were created by two Battletech players shortly after rec.games.mecha was created on Usenet. In regular Battletech, missiles, both short-range (SRM) and long-range (LRM), act more like rockets--they have no guidance systems and are launched all at once from their launchers. Hits are determined by the number of missiles fired and the roll made by the player. Weapon systems such as Streak SRMs, TAG (Target Acquisition Gear), Artemis FCS (Fire Control System), Narc beacons, and C3 systems are the only remedies to this problem. After firing its missiles, a launcher then reloads from a large magazine which provides multiple salvos in one-ton allotments.

FASA's reasoning for this has been that the Succession Wars have been wars of attrition. Technology has regressed from the high point of the Star League, and so naturally, things have to be done on the cheap to keep each Successor State's war machine going. This didn't ring true for neither the writers of the Omega Rules nor myself. I found it rather impossible that a 60-ton 'mech could lug around over 100 missiles in its body, which is filled with mechanisms, myomer muscles, and other systems. To get around this problem, the Omega Rules state that missile launchers on 'mechs are one-shot affairs. Each tube in a launcher holds a single missile--there are no reloads. In addition, I followed the cues from the Omega Rules and upped the damage and range SRMs and LRMs have. Finally, missiles must be fired one at a time from a launcher. In the case of a 'mech bearing two missile launchers, such as an Archer, which carries two LRM-20s, a missile from each could be launched.

I have adopted a number of other house rules for Battletech from both the Omega Rules and Battletechnology magazine. I would put them or their references in print here, but that would take up too much space.

Running with the wind: The netrunning systems in cyberpunk RPGs have been a source of grief for many gamemasters and players. To eliminate a lot of the time and frustration, I boiled down CP2020's netrunning system to its bare elements and combined it with the system provided

in the Hardwired sourcebook and my own understanding of computers from my college studies. Add to it some spice created by Amy "Mockery" Luther and Gary "Ocelot" Astleford, and I've found it to be a nice and much more realistic alternative to the published system.

Overall, my homebrew system alleviates the need for movement rules and system maps. Network maps showing system locations in cities and countries are still needed, however. By cutting out the movement rules, the actual hacking is nothing more than a skill roll or two, modified by bonuses and penalties such as software, hardware flaws and damage from both real-life and computer combat.

When converting, it's best to have a translator: Sometimes when I convert technology or characters between games--or even go to port an entire game to another system (e.g. porting the original Marvel Super Heroes to Alternity)--I find things work easier when I use a translator or find common points between both systems. When I use a translator, I commonly use FUDGE (Freeform Universal Do-it-yourself Gaming Engine) to get more accurate results in comparing scores. Granted, sometimes things don't come out right and I have to eyeball the scores a little more, but it doesn't hurt to have a translator. In the case of moving MSH into Alternity, the systems were too different and didn't even fit within the notes provided in the FUDGE rulebook. Instead, I determined how much damage the average "Normal" could take in each system, compared that information with how much a certain character's powers (Cyclops' optic blasts) could do and compared results between the two.

When in doubt, kitbash: While I'm not a fan of GURPS as a generic system, I am quite fond of using the worldbooks and Compendium I as a reference for other games. Case in point: WEG's new DC Universe RPG lacks a definitive magic system. Rather than suffer with the minimal rules provided or make up my own, I rely upon a variation of a system presented in the WEDGE (West End's Devoted Gaming Enthusiasts) fanzine. Duane Abrams wrote "Using GURPS Magic with D6," which gives some guidelines to using GURPS Magic and GURPS Grimoire with the D6 system--and it works!

DC Universe also lacks time travel and alternate timeline material, so I picked up GURPS Time Travel and plan to get a hold of GURPS Alternate Earths 1 and 2. To handle cybernetics, I am using a modified version of the rules provided in Cracken's Rebel Field Guide for Star Wars. I've also found Guide to the Planets Volumes 1-3, Cynabar's Fantastic Technology: Droids, Galladinium's Fantastic Technology and Galaxy Guide 8: Scouts to be excellent sources of alien technology and supplemental rules for the DCU game. This list will no doubt grow as my rule and information needs for DCU develop.

On the same wavelength, I picked up GURPS Cthulhupunk mostly for the BRP-to-GURPS conversion rules. I've been considering possibly running a Redwall game using the animal rules from GURPS Bunnies and Burrows and GURPS Cthulhupunk's conversion notes as references while basing the actual rules in the Pendragon version of BRP. The same idea has crossed my mind about running a fantasy campaign based in GURPS Fantasy's Yrth, but using Pendragon task resolution and Runequest magic rules.

I also apply this rule to multiple editions and versions of the same game. Star Wars is my prime example for this. There are some rules in the first edition that I have simply carried over to the revised and expanded second edition, such as player-characters having 18D to allocate to attributes and 7D to allocate to skills--none of this D&D-ish mini-maxing nonsense that WEG tried to push in the second edition. When (and if) I run RuneQuest, I (will) use Pendragon's task resolution system (I deplore strike ranks), but most everything else from RQIII and the RQIII mailing list archives. I've also had the scary and strange idea running through my head of converting AD&D to BRP...

The Dragon and the Cross Revisited

I see that my article on Christian gaming raised a few eyebrows among my fellow contributors. When I first read the comments appearing in issues #36 and #37, I was at first surprised, then a bit dismayed. After doing some thinking on the issue, I came to the conclusion the comments had simply come at a bad time and nobody meant any offense. When I first read the comments, the Christian Gamers' Guild was going through some rough waters both on and off the mailing list.

The entire incident, believe it or not, started over a "Perspectives" piece a fellow guild member wrote. The piece, which was based in the world of Mage: The Ascension, was that of a "Christian Mage" living in that world. The piece drew some polite, concern-filled criticism from the guild president (who believes fervently that magic of any type has no place in Christian games) which later became heated to white-hot intensity.

Since I don't play Mage: The Ascension, I ignored the thread, unaware of what was going on. Still, because of the sheer volume of e-mail generated on the topic, I began getting a gut feeling something bad was going on. At any rate, the entire fight resulted in our president's resignation and departure from both the CGG board and general discussion lists. In the words of a recently departing guild member, "much weirdness" ensued. After leaving, our former president then proceeded to tell his side of the story on another Christian mailing list while putting a spin on things to garner support and sympathy. He also defaced the guild's website by pasting an "ICHABOD" (translation: "the Glory of the Lord has departed") sign over the guild's banner.

Of course, this was not the end of the strangeness. The antagonist of this tale returned to the list under a false name and proceeded to post--in false broken English--as a Sudanese Baha'i. This, needless to say, generated a little more conflict. As I write this, debate regarding the article and the e-zine's stance on it have been vigorously debated, apologies have been submitted and wounds have been nursed. Our former president briefly returned to the public list, expressed a few apologies and owned up to the vandalism as well as posing as our mysterious Baha'i visitor.

At first, he seemed unwilling to let the entire incident die and had posted publicly to the list, stating that while he did commit the vandalism, make inflammatory posts and pose as another person on the list, the other members of the list forced him to do it. Some of his posts raised peoples' hackles and caused others to unsubscribe from the list. Originally, the board of directors was unsure

what to do--should we ban him again or publicly reprimand him? Before we could come to some sort of consensus, our ex-president mysteriously unsubscribed, never to be seen on the list again.

At the same time, we are working on posting and conduct guidelines, a guild constitution, statements of faith and other bylaws in order to give the group more structure and stability. We are also working on the direction of our electronic magazine, The Way, the Truth & the Dice as well as guidelines for acceptable and unacceptable content. As director of public relations I myself am working on a presentation on Christianity and fantasy games for the general public as well as a freelance article on RPGs for Christianity Today. At any rate, I digress...

To be brief, I'd like to remind everyone that "The Dragon and the Cross" is still "in progress." The ideas I am working with are still developing and so not every possibility was likely considered in my writing of the piece. In this piece, I'd like to attempt to clarify some of my ideas, and address my fellow contributors' comments. To prevent confusion, I'll address people's comments in the order they appeared in IR #37.

Joe Teller, The Swashbuckling Mage Rides Again #8-9: I agree with your initial frustrations regarding Christians' inability to explain their objections. A key case in point is what happened in the CGG. Sometimes I even get testy with my own inability to explain the reasons behind my objections to some things in the world as a Christian.

I also agree that there are Christians who abuse the religion for their own socio-political agendas. The tragedies instigated in the name of God, including the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Protestant/Catholic conflict in Ireland and the "ethnic cleansing" in the former Yugoslavia, were really instigated in the name of greed, power, hatred and other socio-political reasons. During the days of the Inquisition, landowners would accuse each other of witchcraft and heresy simply to get at each other's property. In Ireland, the conflict between Protestant and Catholic has gone on for so long, nobody is sure why the conflict exists. When Irish children are asked why they are so hateful to their peers and others who are not of their denomination, they respond that they don't know why or that "it's fun."

Not all games which are labeled as Christian focus on the minutiae or the pettiness of some Christians' desire to convert non-Christians. I have not found such pettiness or arrogance in the Redemption CGG. However, one could say that such problems are rampant in Dragonraids--which they are. Dragonraids took the idea of a roleplaying game and twisted it--severely. The fantasy allegory was so unrealistic and transparent, any hard-core fantasy gamer would probably get cavities or sugar shock just from reading the material. At the same time, the delivery of the game's message was pretty weak.

You ask why I focus on destroying "non-Christian" things in fantasy worlds. As a child, I was taught first and foremost that there is no other deity but God. Yes, I could focus on messages of tolerance, good deeds and heroism that fits a Christian message, but without Christ such things become futile and meaningless. In the Christian faith, we are taught that we must distinguish

between the Law of God and the Law of Words. In the Christian faith, good deeds and heroic actions are futile without faith in Christ and His redemption. Conversely, "faith without works is dead." To simply believe that man can be good and moral without faith in or guidance from God is to fall under the Law of Words, which is viewed as the path to destruction. Mind you, this is just in my faith--other faiths have different views on such matters.

Why must other gods and goddesses automatically be servants of demons and devils? I think you've read more into this than really meets the eye. What I said, or at least meant to say, is that the gods and goddesses could be demons and devils in disguise, effectively deceiving their worshipers. As I noted before, Christians are taught first and foremost that "There is no God before the Lord your God." Because of this, the idea of a pantheon of benevolent deities in a fantasy world is not an option for a Christian gamer.

Another possibility is that the worship of other deities is actually a form of hero- or heroine-worship. In WFRP, Sigmar Heldenhammer, the greatest hero of the Empire, is revered as a god by the Sigmarite cult. The same thing could happen to those heroes and heroines who are bestowed with immortality by their world's deity.

Also, we can't rule out the possibility of different names for a deity in different cultures. God and His Son have many different names in the Holy Bible: Adonai, Emmanuel, the Good Shepherd, El Olam (Eternal God), Elohim, El Shaddai (God Almighty), Jehovah, Yahweh, etc. A good example is that of Gandalf in The Lord of the Rings. In many different Middle-Earth cultures he had different names. A deity's many hats or roles in society can also be reason for having more than one name or title. In Stephen Lawhead's Empyrion duology, the deity of the Fieri has many names based on His many Aspects (Protector, Great Father, Provider, etc). So, in short, making the deities of other pantheons into false gods is not the only answer.

As for the RCC's "Christianizing" of pagan deities, I cannot comment as I have not studied that aspect of the church's history in-depth. You also ask why Jews and Moslems can't be treated with respect in my games. I treat Jews and Moslems with respect in my games by accurately researching their faiths. In my research I try to steer away from stereotypes, false information and hateful rhetoric. In fact, I would do the same for any real-world faith appearing in a game I run.

You question why a "good" non-Christian character can't be as effective as a Christian character in a Christian game. It depends on how you define "effective." If you mean from a game mechanics point or from a professional standpoint, there is no reason for such a disparity. If you are asking from the view of that character attaining eternal life/reaching the afterlife, it once again boils down to (in my faith) the Law of God vs. the Law of Words (see above).

Do I have to preach at folks? Do I have to punish people for minor mistakes or alternative lifestyles? No. When someone uses the word "preach," the word "convert" is usually not far behind in my mind's eye. As I stated before, Christian gaming, under my definition, is not about gaining converts, but educating people about what Christianity is truly about--dispelling the myths people

have about Christianity. Conversion is a personal decision that a person has to make for themselves--it can't be made for them.

In his essay, "The Moral Imperative of Fantasy," Tracy Hickman states "...people are going to take something from your games and incorporate them into their lives whether you want them to or not. The experience of your game is going to teach them something: perhaps not big lessons but subtle ones." Since I live in a largely Christian community and am a practicing Christian myself, I feel that if I'm going to have a moral game, then Christ has to be a part of that morality, either in the form of allegory or in terms of the real-life faith.

As for people who engage in alternative lifestyles, I feel no need to punish people for such things. Regardless of what other Christians say or do, I, as a Christian, do not have the right to punish them for their sins. I would welcome a homosexual or bisexual person into my group as openly as I would a Wiccan or the former president of the CGG--with the understanding that while I don't agree with their lifestyle or ideas, I still accept them as a human being and friend. Case in point: one of my players and best friends from college is a self-proclaimed heathen. Does that mean I should stop being his friend? No. I continue to run games with him and we get along fine. He understands that I'm a Christian. At the same time, I understand that he does not want to be converted to Christianity and although it makes me sad, I am still his friend.

Some would say that's hypocritical, but it isn't. That's called "hating the sin but loving the sinner." That's what God does. Not every Christian believes it and it can be hard to do at times (even for me), but to me, it's the truth. Does that mean I don't see myself as a sinner? No. I know I screw up. I screw up daily. Sometimes I open my fat gob at the wrong time or I do the wrong thing. As a result, I must pray for God's grace and forgiveness to see me through.

You also question my opinions on Ars Magica. From my point of view, the game's focus is Mythic Europe. If the game's focus were strictly hermetic magic, the sourcebook Pax Dei would not have been published (in my opinion). A Christian Ars Magica campaign would not necessarily involve hunting down the mages--there are other types of Christian campaigns which could be run in the game--rooting out corruption in the Church, or fighting the injustices spawned by the Inquisition, for example. Another idea would be to run a Reformation-era intrigue campaign with the player-characters acting on behalf of Martin Luther and other Reformationists.

Let me ask you a question: What difference does it make how I change the game rules or world? Does it make me a bad gamer or a "traitor and quisling to the hobby" (to quote an infamous individual) if I change the game to something that I feel morally and spiritually comfortable playing? I don't think so. Everybody is going to have a difference of opinion on how a game is to be run, what the focus should be, how the game world should be represented and other nitpicky issues.

The same issue came up on rec.games.frp.misc a couple of years ago when a member of the CGG posted a request for information on Christian D&D websites. One individual outright called the original poster an "idiot troll" and then argued that the idea that D&D required changes to make

it compatible with Christianity was "ludicrous." Obviously, the original poster was uncomfortable with some of the things in the D&D system or in the game world and wanted to change it--what's wrong with that? As noted in my own article on house rules, I listed my own changes for D&D.

You also mentioned that not every denomination will see eye-to-eye. The flamewar and ensuing incidents on and off the CGG list are a prime example of that. I take no offense at your comments--as I said before, the comments hit me at a strenuous time, both mentally and spiritually. I never once meant to infer that Christianity should be the only idea in a setting--I only meant to give some pointers on how to create Christian allegories and campaigns in the same fashion as Christian fiction.

Collie Collier, Firestarter 18: I'm sorry to hear about your encounters with Christian gamers and their misguided products. They always say the road to Hell is paved with good intentions. It would seem Jacquays and the two gamemasters in your former on-line game are proof of it. I recently purchased the second of Jacquays' Central Casting books and found the section on religion remarkably short-sighted and narrow-minded. No offense taken at your statements, by the way. I too enjoy a non-heated debate, just not of the white-hot intensity that was brewing on the CGG list.

Kiralee McCauley, Sign of the Dancing Priestess #8: I'm sorry you found my article frustrating. As far as not going far enough, please understand, my ideas are still on this are still developing and I'm still trying to figure out how best to express it in print. Let's take a look at my definition again:

Christian role-playing is the use of an RPG to teach others about Jesus Christ and the gospel either through allegory or directly through the game. Christian role-playing is not meant to gain converts, merely to educate. Conversion to Christianity from another religion or from one denomination to another is a personal decision which cannot be forced upon anyone.

To design a Christian scenario or campaign fitting the above definition, I usually start off by asking myself, "What do I want to teach through this adventure?" or by simply looking through scripture and finding an interesting story to use as a framework. Tracy Hickman gave a good example of this in his essays on the ethics of fantasy gaming by using the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-7):

In rough outline, such an adventure might run like this: The players are confronted by two men. One is a warrior in shining armor and bristling with weapons, the other his servant. The warrior says he will show them the way to Haven (Heaven). The servant, however, says that he can show the players the true way. (Matthew 5:3)

Following the servant, the players walk across a great field of battle. A woman stands among the thousand dead and weeps. If the players help the woman with kindness, she shows them the invisible path to the castle in the clouds. (Matthew 5:4)

Reaching the castle, the players are confronted with a great talking gate flanked by two fists atop massive arms. Any attempt to force the door open results in the player's characters being attacked by the fists but if they will ask politely and lay down their weapons, the door will open on its own. (Matthew 5:5)

Would it be difficult to show 'hunger and thirst' (Matthew 5:6) or a situation where mercy would be better than fighting (Matthew 5:7)?

After deciding on the message, I then detail such things as the plotline, the villains, NPCs and other items and encounters as I would any other adventure, but at the same time, I try my absolute best to retain the message the original story is trying to convey.

As for "adequate mechanics" regarding the spiritual aspects of a character's life, that's a big debate, especially on the CGG mailing list. Some designers believe you have to have a set of game mechanics detailing spiritual warfare and the effects of sin on a character's life. Others believe roleplaying is much better and not as restrictive as mechanics. I tend to agree with the latter view--you can't define spiritual warfare and its effects with rules nor can you base a deity's decision and action on a die roll.

Determining a deity's actions in a setting by dice alone makes that deity inconsistent at best and untrustworthy at worst. Randomization is best reserved for uncertainties, such as how many undead a cleric can turn in one shot and whether or not a weapon makes a critical hit. At the same time, there is the risk that a lack of randomization leaves religion and divine intervention wide open to the interpretations of the GM. This can be a problem, especially if the GM has a narrow-minded, shallow or incorrect view of a specific religion or of religion in general. I myself have yet to come up with a sure-fire way of representing divine power in a fantasy game of any type and I have yet to see anyone else come up with one that makes everyone comfortable.

In short, you've all given me a lot to think about in respect to Christian gaming and how to run a campaign that won't put anyone off.

Commentary

It is with some sadness that I announce this will be my final issue in IR. Due to computer problems, a number of other commitments as well as financial difficulties, I am no longer able to reliably send a 'zine in to IR on a regular basis. It has been an honor and a privilege to be able to contribute to this magazine since its early days. I have enjoyed participating, reading and giving commentary on IR. I will certainly miss the camaraderie you shared with me. I would ask that any commentary directed at this issue be sent to my e-mail address at sylvrepheire@yahoo.com. Thank you.

Colophon

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